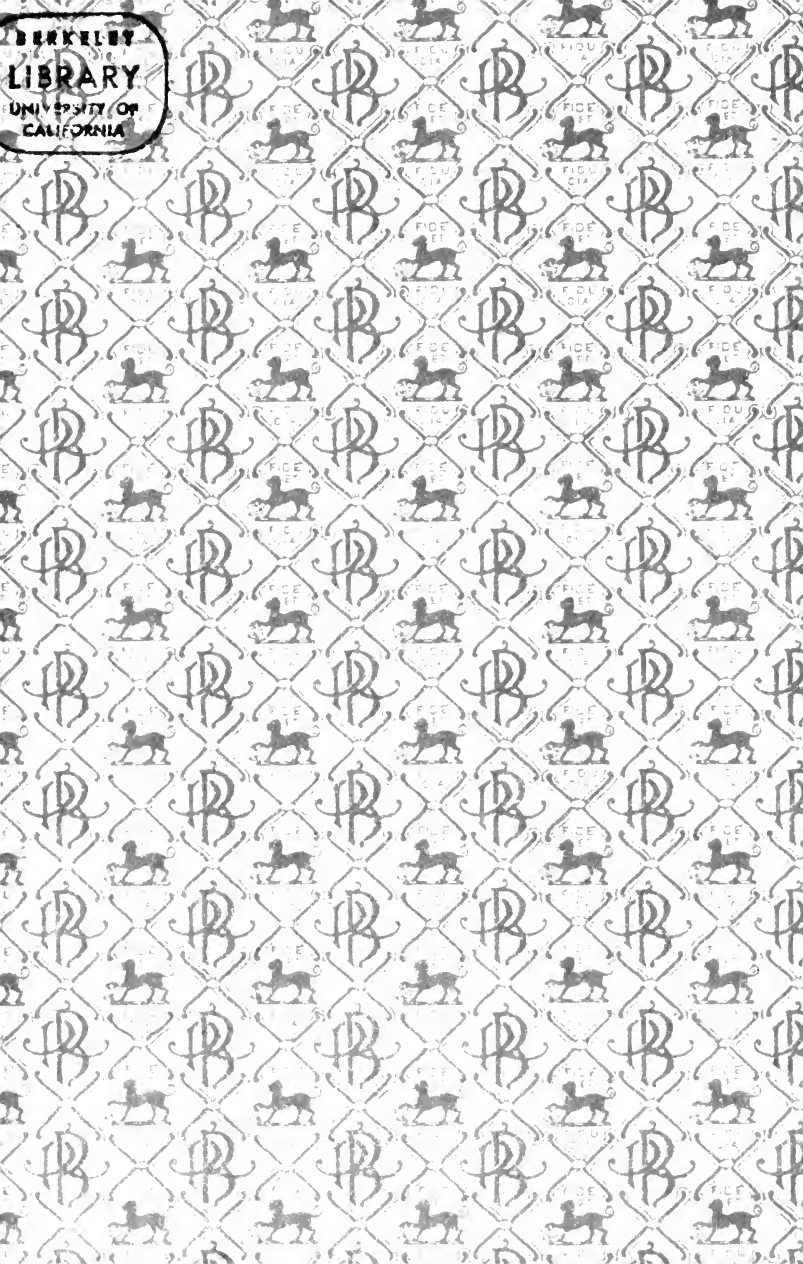
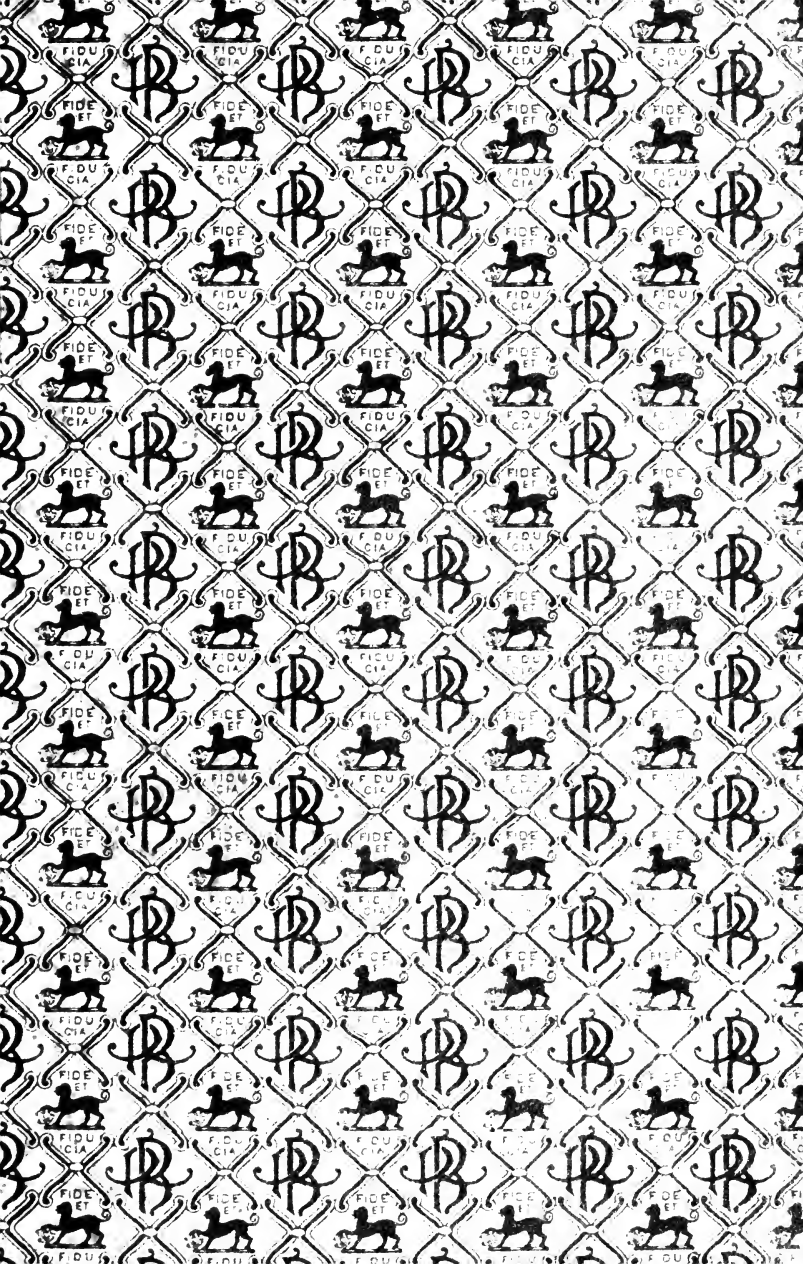


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BORDERLAND

BORDERLAND

A COUNTRY-TOWN CHRONICLE

BY

JESSIE FOTHERGILL

AUTHOR OF 'THE FIRST VIOLIN,' 'KITH AND KIN,' 'PROBATION,'
'THE WELLFIELDS,' AND 'HEALEY'



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
IN CHILDHOOD	1
I. OTHO'S RETURN	11
II. MAGDALEN—AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD	25
III. LANGSTROTH'S FOLLY	37
IV. THE FACULTY OF CLOSE OBSERVATION	47
V. GILBERT'S CAUTIOUSNESS	56
VI. GILBERT'S 'COUP DE THEATRE'	62
VII. MICHAEL, ROGER, GILBERT	78
VIII. THE FIRST-FRUITS OF THE WISDOM OF GILBERT	92
IX. THE GODDESS OF THE TENDER FEET	102
X. THE PROCESS OF ANNEALING	111
XI. OTHO'S LETTER-BAG	119
XII. ELEANOR	133
XIII. TWENTY-EIGHT AND TWENTY-TWO	145

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. THRUST AND PARRY	150
XV. THREE WOMEN	163
XVI. A FRIENDSHIP EXPLAINED	172
XVII. ROGER CAMM'S COURTING	181
XVIII. A WILD-GOOSE CHASE	188
XIX. INEVITABLE	204
XX. HOW A THORN WAS PLANTED	222
XXI. WORK AND WAGES	237
XXII. CROSS-PURPOSES	255
XXIII. QUARREL	267
XXIV. OTHO'S REVENGE. . . .	277
XXV. IN THE ANTE-ROOM	287
XXVI. HER HEART'S DESIRE	296
XXVII. RECRIMINATION	306
XXVIII. AT THE MILLS	316
XXIX. A FALSE STEP IN GOOD FAITH	327
XXX. SERMON, BY A SINNER	343
XXXI. BRASS POTS AND EARTHENWARE PIPKINS.	359
XXXII. FIRST ALARM	375
XXXIII. BROKEN OFF	383
XXXIV. HOW CRACKPOT WAS SCRATCHED	391

CHAPTER	PAGE
XXXV. 'CARELESSE CONTENTE' . . .	400
XXXVI. THE SHADOW	409
XXXVII. THE RETURN	418
XXXVIII. ADA	432
XXXIX. THE BROTHERS	440
XL. 'AMIDST THE BLAZE OF NOON' . .	449
XLI. 'LET ME ALONE'	460
XLII. HOW ADA SOLVED HER PROBLEM .	465
XLIII. MAGDALEN. IN VALEDICTION .	474

BORDERLAND

IN CHILDHOOD

ONE summer, which in point of date now lies many years behind us, four boys used to play together, and to quarrel and make it up again with one another—to live together through the long, golden days, that vivid, eager life peculiar to children, in a curious, old-fashioned garden on the bank of the river Tees, and on the Durham side of that stream. The garden belonged to a great house, not very old, though it was the abode of an old family, solemn, not to say gloomy, in its dulness and stateliness of appearance, and standing out in rather sombre contrast to the woods which were behind it, and the terraces which sloped down from its front to the river-side. The name of the house was Thorsgarth; many a spot hereabouts bore some name reminiscent of long-past Danish occupation and Scandinavian paganism. It was a characteristic giving a peculiar flavour to the language and nomenclature of the whole country-side, and one, too, which has been sweetly sung by at least one of our English poets. With this fact, these four particular boys were probably unacquainted, and it is more than probable that if they had known all about it they

would have cared less than nothing for the circumstance. What could it matter to them that, a little farther down the stream, that sweet spot where they loved to wade in the shallows, and not far from which noisy Greta came tumbling and laughing into the arms of sedater Tees—where the numerous wasps' nests were to be found under the bank, to destroy which nests they had gone through such delicious toils and perils, and where on sunny days the trout would lurk in the pools amongst the big boulders,—what could it matter to them that this scene had been immortalised by both poet and painter? To them it was all their own paradise; the presence of an artist would have vexed and incommoded them. There they kicked, jumped, splashed, and generally misconducted themselves in the sweet solitude and the generous sunshine of that far-back summer, without a thought of its being hallowed ground. Three of them were not of an age at which the ordinary boy is given to appreciate poetry. As for the eldest of them, if he ever did read it, he kept the fact to himself.

These four boys were all the sons of gentlemen, in the conventional sense of the term—albeit their fathers were men of widely different calibre, as regarded not only worldly, but also mental and moral characteristics.

The eldest and the third in age were brothers, Michael and Gilbert Langstroth. Their father's was one of the oldest families in the neighbourhood, and had been one of the richest, although many people had begun to say that not much was now practically left to him except the old house itself, the Red Gables, which stood in genial vicinity to many other houses, both great and small, in the great cobble-stoned, slanting square, which formed the west end of Bradstane town.

Michael Langstroth at this period was twelve years old, a noble boy to look at, tall and broad, with a dark face, and a sweet, rather rare smile. There was a good deal of unconscious pride in his manner and bearing. Perhaps his piercing gray eyes, going with this dark complexion, might really betoken that Norse descent in which his family gloried. All his actions were, so far as one could judge, in harmony with his outer appearance; without fuss or ostentation, but all partaking of the intrinsically splendid, generous, and lavish. Even at this early time of their lives, the other boys knew that Michael hated lies with an intensity which showed itself more in sudden, violent action than in words. They knew that he resented any untruth amongst them as if it had been a personal insult. There was, indeed, no doubt that Michael was a son in whose proud looks a father might glory; while with all his strength and power there were in him other and quieter charms, such as a mother might delight in. And Mrs. Langstroth did very greatly delight in what seemed to her her son's high and noble qualities, during the short time that she was allowed to do so.

'I fear it will never last,' she would say to herself, watching him with prayer and trembling, as mothers do watch those sons who have a way of turning into something so different from what the maternal yearnings would shape them into if, along with the yearnings, the power existed of fulfilling them. 'I fear it will never last. Contact with the world will harden him. Flattery will make him vain. Universal homage will spoil him.' Mrs. Langstroth was a sweet and saintly lady, and her son Michael a brave and noble boy; but what insignificant hen-mother exists who does not think that the

attention to herself and her matchless offspring must of necessity be universal?

With pathetic, devoted blindness she would have prepared him to meet this irresistible tide of flattery and greatness by keeping him fast at her own side, and never loosing his leading strings. The mention of a public school drew tears from her eyes, and set her gentle heart beating wildly. It was written that her son Michael's education—every branch of it—was to be taken out of her hands, and placed in others, firmer, harder, sterner, and to them who can survive their roughness, kinder hands than even those of a mother.

Gilbert, Michael's brother, was a well-grown boy, too, of ten, with a smaller, rounder head, a narrower forehead, and blue-gray eyes, which had a trick of languishing sometimes. He had an exquisitely soft and melancholy voice, was slow of speech, and possessed a graceful, though by no means effeminate figure. He was always, and apparently by nature, courteous and gentle in manner and speech, seldom indulging in the downright unflattering candour which Michael, for all he was so gentlemanly, frequently used towards his companions. Gilbert never said rude things to any one, but he was not so popular with his comrades as Michael.

The second boy, in order of years, was swarthy Roger Camm, the son of the curate of Bradstane. Eleven were the years he counted in actual point of time—thirty, perhaps, and those rough ones, in his knowledge of care and trouble, in his painful, enforced acquaintance with grief, with contrivances and economies, and weary struggles to make both ends meet. For his father was not passing rich on forty pounds a year—he was more

than passing poor on something less than a hundred, out of which he had dolefully to 'keep up the appearance of a gentleman,' clothe and feed his son and himself, and educate the former. His wife, poor soul, exhausted with the endless and complicated calculations necessitated by this ever-present problem, had some years ago thankfully closed her eyes, and said good-bye to labour and grief. The curate and his lad struggled on without her as best they could. All that Roger learnt, whether of solid instruction or flimsy accomplishment—little enough was there of the latter to gloss his manners or appearance—he was taught by his father, and that with fasting and prayer. Along with his Latin and Greek declensions, he imbibed also the more bitter lesson of declining fortunes; for his father had married late, and was not promoted as he grew older and more careworn. Side by side with the first problem of Euclid, as with the last, there was for ever present another, which it would have required more than a mere mathematical head to answer, and which yet imperiously demanded some sort of a solution; it was the problem which Mrs. Camm had carried with her to her grave, and it ran: 'Given, not sufficient income to buy a proper supply of butcher's meat, cakes, and ale, how to make water-porridge twice a day, with skim-milk to wash it down, answer the same purpose as the more liberal diet, save on certain rare and solemn feast-days, not specified in the calendar.' And along with the invaluable rule, that prepositions govern the objective case (for the Rev. Silas Camm held fast by the Lindley Murray of his boyhood), Roger grasped and held fast the axiom, so that he could and did mould his conduct upon it, that to bear your hardships in silence is necessary—that to utter one word of complaint, to

look greedily at occasional dainties, or to gorge in unseemly fashion on the abundance at other men's tables, no matter what the size of the internal void to be filled; to betray by word, look, or deed that you ever feel the pinch of hunger at home—to do this is disgrace of the deepest dye, second only to lying and stealing. By the time he was eleven years old, Roger had digested these lessons thoroughly, and had, as it were, assimilated them, so that they were in his system. Sometimes, at the abundant 'spreads' on the Thorsgarth or Red Gables boards, his sallow young face would take a faint glow, his deep-set black eyes would grow wistfully misty, but never a word betrayed the bareness of the board at home, nor the fact that his father might even then be asking a blessing upon a bowl of oatmeal-porridge, sole reward of a hard day's work. For the living of Bradstane, although ancient, was not rich, and the parish priest's own stipend was not a fat one. Judge, therefore, how exceeding short the curate must have come!

Roger was on good terms with all his companions, and if they sometimes wondered why he never used to ask them to go and play with him, or have tea with him, they were quite satisfied with his explanation, that there was no garden to his father's house, and they agreed with him, that without a garden to play in there could be no fun. He and Michael Langstroth, very dissimilar in almost everything, were fast friends, while Gilbert Langstroth and the fourth and last of this party of boys hung together in a lukewarm manner, the older and calmer of them often quietly instigating the mischief that the younger one performed.

This fourth and youngest was Otho Askam, the only

son of the master of Thorsgarth, and heir to the sombre-looking house, and the grand old garden in which they all disported themselves. Otho, like his friends, was tall for his age, and well set-up. One can but guess at the man to come, in the little father of eight years old. But Otho gave strong signs of individuality even at this early age. The other boys, if they had spoken their minds, would have said that he was fitful and moody in temper; that no one could tell what would please, what offend him; that, when he was pleased, it was in a saturnine, mirthless style, strange in so young a child; that when offended, his wrath was more deep than loud, but that his brown eyes glowed, on such occasions, with a dull fire, and his childish face in its anger took an expression of savage fierceness. They could also have related, these other boys, that when angry, Otho never rested till he had revenged himself, either by damaging or mutilating some of their cherished 'things,' or by doing them bodily harm, as grievous as his childish brain and small hands could devise and compass. By the end of the summer they had got used to it. They laughed at him, and talked about his 'little rages.' They were bigger and stronger than he was. The youngest of them was two years his senior. They used to tease him sometimes, on purpose to have the fun of seeing what shape his vengeance would take, and would shout with laughter at its feebleness when wreaked.

There was on record one great occasion on which Michael Langstroth had failed to see the amusing side of an escapade of Otho's, and had taken upon himself to give him a sound hiding (with due regard, that is, to the difference in their ages and strengths). It was sound enough, however, for Master Otho to make the welkin

ring again with his yells; but the thrashing had been administered in payment, with interest, if possible, of Otho's wanton cruelty to a wretched, half-starved cat, which he had pursued with the vindictive determination not so much to compass its death, as to secure to it as long a term of torture as possible, before that death should take place.

'You cowardly little viper, you!' Michael had shouted, towering over him after the first half of the pummelling had been administered. 'Don't you know that it's nothing but a coward, and a dirty one, that hurts things that can't fight back? You miserable little beggar, you!'

'Michael, I'll kill you, I'll kill you! I hate you! I wish the devil would get hold of you. I'll kill you some day for this. What do you hit me for? I can't hit *you* back, you great coward!'

At which there was a great laugh from the other boys, none the less hilarious when the big lad, looking scornfully down upon the little one, said—

'I do it for your good, and you ought to be thankful for it.'

Otho snuffled then, but took an early opportunity of laying a crooked root in an unexpected and obscure spot, over which Michael tripped ignominiously, and nearly barked his shins, when the snuffle became a joyful chuckle.

Later in the same afternoon, Michael Langstroth found himself apart from the other boys, in a lonely part of the garden, where a broad terrace ended, and rough, uncut grass, dotted with wild plants, began—the top of the river-bank, in fact. The lad seated himself on this bank, under a tree, just out of the broiling sun, and a silence

and quietness fell upon him, while he gazed before him into the gurgling, flowing river. It was a pastime he loved. Shadowy, half-formed thoughts passed through his brain at such times, thoughts as vague as the murmur of the river; intuitions, impulses stirred him, whose nature he did not now understand, but which, for all that, might be not the less blessed and fruitful in years to come, when he should have forgotten these, their first upspringings; for thus it is, as well as in other ways, that 'the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.'

The river was the thing which Michael remembered longer than anything else. When a babe in his nurse's arms he had leaped at its sudden shimmer through the trees, and since then its presence had been ever with him, more or less. It had been his companion and confidant without his knowing it. He went unconsciously to its side to think out his young thoughts, and it carried all his vague meditations gliding down its stream as it flowed between the two fair counties of York and Durham. Of course, he was not conscious how potent was its presence in his life; he would find that out only when he should come to move in other scenes—when he should get men for his companions instead of the stream.

Little more remains to be said of them at this time, save that the mothers of the Langstroths and of Otho Askam were both living then, young and beautiful women, one of them, at least, wrapped up in her husband and her children. Otho was the only one of the lads who had a sister, the little Eleanor, three years of age, and so much younger than they that she never shared their sports; and they knew nothing of her, save when they saw her sometimes walking on the upper ter-

race, led by her nurse or her mother, when she would sometimes stop and look at them with a pair of great candid eyes, and burst into a laugh at some of their antics. A sturdy-looking, not very pretty child, with little resemblance to Otho in either expression or complexion.

CHAPTER I

OTHO'S RETURN

IT was a dull morning in October, with a gray sky, low-hanging clouds, and muddy lanes. The Tees Valley Hunt breakfasted that morning at Sir Thomas Winthrop's, and the brothers, Michael and Gilbert Langstroth, rode slowly in company towards the house. Michael was now twenty-five, and Gilbert just turned twenty-three. They had ridden and hunted ever since they had been able to stick on the back of a pony, and, despite their changed fortunes—for the house of Langstroth was no more a flourishing house—they rode and hunted still. They felt a deeper degree of interest than usual in this particular breakfast, for it was known to them, as to all the rest of the neighbourhood, that the long-closed doors of Thorsgarth had at last been thrown open; Otho Askam's minority was over, and he had come, or was on his way, to take possession of the house of his fathers, and the abundant revenues and possessions which had been accumulating for him. It was now several months since he had come of age, but he had not immediately repaired to his home. Now, Otho Askam, Michael and Gilbert Langstroth, and their friend Roger Camm, had all played together as children in the Thorsgarth garden, had shouted through its avenues, chased each other amongst

its discoloured marble fauns and nymphs, and almost succeeded, more than once, in drowning themselves in the waters of swiftly-rushing Tees, who flowed beneath the lowest terrace of the garden. That had been more than ten years ago, and many changes had taken place since then. The Askam fortunes had accumulated; the deaths of both Mr. and Mrs. Askam had left their children—Otho, and a girl, Eleanor, several years younger than him—under the care of guardians, while their property increased. The Langstroths, on the contrary, had gone downhill to a certain extent. Poor then, they had become poorer since, till now, Mr. Langstroth, their father, was a hopeless, helpless invalid; Michael, the elder, was by way of earning his living as a country doctor, this chance having been given to him by the kindness of the old family friend and adviser, the little Quaker Doctor Rowntree, whose assistant Michael was supposed to be. Gilbert stayed at home, tended his father, and devoted his distinguished arithmetical powers to an endeavour to extricate the family fortunes in some degree from the confusion into which they had fallen. As for Roger Camm, whose father had been the curate of Bradstane-on-Tees, he had vanished for years past from the scenes of his childhood; but he and Michael, who had been friends in those former days, were friends still, keeping up a close correspondence. And if Roger by any chance imagined that Gilbert had forgotten him, he was mistaken. Gilbert Langstroth had a long memory.

It was not only these brothers who looked forward with interest to the possibility of young Askam's presence at the meet that morning. All the country-side was more or less agog on the subject. Thorsgarth was a very considerable house; the Askams were very con-

siderable people in the neighbourhood. Every one was excited ; many fair creatures had gone so far as to say that they were 'dying to see him,' dying to know what he was like, and if he were going to be an acquisition, or not, to their society. People began to recall things, and to say to one another, 'Ay, I remember how his mother used to ride to hounds ; what a woman she was ! How handsome, and what a temper !' And then the voices would sink a little, while for the benefit of some stranger it would be related how the late Mrs. Askam had come to her untimely end ; how she would go out one day, despite her husband's expostulations ; how she put her horse at a certain fence, which he refused ; how she flogged him on till he unwillingly took the leap, and caught his legs in the top rail, pitching his rider head foremost off him ; and how Mrs. Askam was carried home with a broken neck.

Half-forgotten things like these were talked about. Amongst all the wondering and speculation there was little kindness, little personal feeling. There was no matron who said, 'Ah, his mother and I used to be great friends ; I know I shall like him for her sake.' For, as a matter of fact, this reckless young woman, who had so untimely died, had not made many friends during the years of her married life in Bradstane. Therefore, every one wondered ; no one really cared what sort of young man Otho Askam might be.

Michael and Gilbert rode slowly on through the deep lanes with their tangled hedges (for some of the folk thereabouts were not as particular about their clipping as they might have been) in the damp morning air, and, emerging from the lanes, struck the stony road, with its rough walls, over which they had to travel to arrive at

Brigsdale Hall, Sir Thomas's place. They were to look at, as goodly a pair of brethren as any in whose company they were likely that day to find themselves.

'Is Magdalen coming to the meet?' asked Gilbert suddenly.

'Yes. She's driving Mrs. Stamer to it. She's staying with Miss Strangforth, and Magdalen doesn't know what on earth to do with her.'

'Ah!' said Gilbert, with his slight, careless smile. 'A meet must be a godsend under such circumstances.' And by and by he made some further observation, to the effect that it was a picture of a day, and that the scent would be grand, to which Michael assented cheerfully; and having got that question settled, they rode up to the hospitable door, delivered their horses over to a groom, and were shown into the dining-room.

Sir Thomas and his son Byrom were there, and the room was full of men, old, young, and middle-aged, standing about, waiting till their host should give the signal to be seated.

It was immediately on going into the room that they saw Otho Askam—for he it must be, and no one else—leaning his elbow on the shelf of an oak sideboard, and listening to some remarks of a neighbouring squire. He was at one end of the room as they entered, and they at the other; but it so happened that there was a little lane or vista from him to them, so that they saw him very plainly.

They looked upon a tall young man, as big, as strong, and as broad as themselves; and there all resemblance ended. It would have been difficult to say whether that face were young or old for its years. Young Askam had a round, bullet-shaped head, a dark complexion, and one

which was also red—a deep, but not yet a coarse red. His forehead, though narrow, was not devoid of power. His smooth dark hair was clipped close. He wore a slight moustache, a mere line on his upper lip, save for which his face was hairless, so that the full play of his lips was seen; and there was something fierce in the expression of those lips; indeed, the whole face was a strange and fierce one. The dark eyes were sullen; the brows had a trick of drawing down and together, quickly and savagely, and then the whole face flushed, and the mouth tightened, and the fingers closed with a suggestive grip upon whatever might happen to be in them at the moment. It was truly an angry-looking face, devoid of beauty; and yet, if one came to analyse the features, it would be found impossible to pronounce it a plain face. The voice, the manners, were such as might be expected from the general outward appearance; that is to say, the voice was abrupt, the sentences curt, and the words often chopped off short in utterance; the manners were brusque, and had a touch of defiance in them.

At the moment when the Langstroths entered the room, Otho had his eyes fixed upon his whip, which he was drawing slowly through the fingers of his left hand. He smiled, and the smile showed a set of very white and very strong teeth; it was not a gracious or a genial expression. Michael Langstroth, looking at him keenly and attentively, said to himself—

‘Humph! he is a magnificent animal, at any rate. I wonder if he is anything else. I should not like to pronounce at a venture whether he were a gentleman or a blackguard; perhaps a bit of both.’

At this juncture, Askam, the curious, sinister smile still on his face, raised his eyes, and encountered those

of Michael Langstroth fixed upon him. The smile vanished, the frown descended, above a defiant and inquiring stare. Evidently he said within himself, 'Who is that man? I ought to know him.'

'Halloa, Michael,' cried the master of the house, at this point, 'good morning to you. I'm glad to see you. How is your father to-day?'

As he listened to this, young Askam's frown disappeared, and his look cleared, as if the thing that puzzled him had been made plain. By the time that Michael had done talking to Sir Thomas, Otho was at his side.

'I say—I ought to remember you. You are Michael Langstroth, aren't you?'

'Yes, I am. I was just coming to speak to you. This is my brother Gilbert; you ought to remember him, too, if you remember me.'

Otho shook hands with them. His countenance was not the best suited for expressing pleasure and geniality, but in a certain saturnine manner he seemed glad to see them both, though he did not say he was, but showed it by asking them many questions, with an air of interest—questions as to what they had been doing 'all these years.' And he stood talking with them, and occasionally with Byrom Winthrop, who joined them, until the voice of Sir Thomas summoned them to the table, when, by some means, Otho and Gilbert found themselves seated side by side, and Michael was not very far away from them.

Otho Askam betrayed none of the awkwardness which would have been natural to, and excusable in, a very young man, who suddenly finds himself a person of condition and importance amongst others, much older and much better known than himself. At the same time his manner was utterly destitute of anything like suavity or

grace, or of aught that could give a clue as to his real habits or tastes in the matter of society ; none could discover from it whether he most haunted and best loved drawing-rooms, studies, clubs, or stables.

He appeared to be at his ease, and yet there was nothing easy about him. He did not laugh at all. Michael, who watched him attentively, could not detect anything more mirthful than that peculiar smile which had been on his face when he first saw him ; and it was a smile which might have been called sinister.

Gilbert and he seemed to keep up an animated conversation, but Michael, though near, could not hear, for the hum of talk around him, what they said. He could only feel silently surprised that they had found any subject in common, for Gilbert, when not engaged in calculations, was something of a bookworm, and loved the flavour of a play or an essay, and was well read in some of our older and less known dramatists. Michael, though still uncertain whether Otho were most like a gentleman or a blackguard, had an inner conviction that he was neither literary in his tastes nor yet devoted to accounts.

Suddenly, in a momentary lull in the talk around him, he heard Otho say—

‘But Dusky Beauty was bred in these parts. I’d take my oath of it.’

‘Of course she was,’ replied Gilbert, with animation. ‘She was bred in old Trueman’s stables, over in Friarsdale, out of Blue Blood, by——’

Here the words were lost in the hum of renewed talk, and Michael was no less lost in astonishment. He felt quite feeble and bewildered with surprise. In all the years that he had known his brother, he had never heard him utter a word which could have led any one to

suppose that racing or horses, beyond his own solitary hunter and riding-horse, had the faintest or most elementary interest for him. And yet, that was he giving information to Otho Askam (not receiving it from him, Michael reflected with astonishment) as to the immediate pedigree of the winner at one of the Spring meetings. More than once since he had finished his studies and been settled in Bradstane, it had been made manifest to him that Gilbert's character contained complexities which he had not fathomed, and here was another instance—to him the most remarkable of all. With a sense of bewilderment, he finished his breakfast, and when it was over rode forth with the others.

At the end of the day, towards five in the afternoon, it came to pass that the three former playmates and new acquaintances rode through Bradstane town together.

'I say,' said Otho—it seemed to be his favourite phrase for opening a sentence—'I wish you two fellows would look in upon me now and then. I dine at eight, and I am perfectly alone just now. It would be a charity if you would come. I can give you a glass of sherry that isn't so bad, and show you one or two trifles that might interest you, at any rate,' and he turned pointedly to Gilbert.

They thanked him for the invitation. Gilbert promised, unconditionally, to go, and that soon. Michael said he would try; he would go as soon as he had time.

'You see,' observed Gilbert, turning to Otho, with a worthy, benevolent air, 'his time is not all his own. There's a lady in the case.'

'Oh, indeed! You are engaged?' asked Otho.

'Yes,' said Michael.

'To some one here?'

'Yes. To Miss Wynter—Magdalen Wynter. She was at the meet this morning with an elderly lady. I was standing by their carriage for a good while.'

'That exceedingly handsome girl, who drove those white ponies so cleverly? She had black hair, and a very knowing sort of fur cap,' Otho said, looking at Michael with interest.

Michael smiled slightly. What a curious way in which to describe his beautiful and somewhat unapproachable Magdalen, was the thought in his mind.

'The same,' he answered, 'though it would never have occurred to me to describe the cap as "knowing."'

'Oh, wasn't it, though!' said Otho emphatically. 'Well, I congratulate you. She is exceedingly handsome. There wasn't another woman there who came anywhere near her. It won't do to be exacting in your case,' he went on, with his dubious smile; 'but, all the same, you will be very welcome if you come.'

'Are you going to live alone?' Michael asked him. 'Doesn't your sister stay with you?'

'My sister—Eleanor—she is at school. I see her sometimes,' said Otho carelessly. 'She told me, the last time I called upon her, that she was going to college, and meant to carry off honours, if I didn't.' He smiled again, and added, 'We part here, I think. Good day. I am glad to have renewed our acquaintance.'

They separated, going their several ways, and the Langstroths rode on in silence for a little time.

'Well,' said Michael presently, 'it cannot be said that he has turned out an interesting character.'

'Opinions differ,' was Gilbert's reply, in a tone which, for him, might be called curt. 'I think he is interesting.'

‘Do you? I should have said you were the last—— By the way, Gilbert, you might have knocked me over with your little finger at breakfast this morning when I heard you talking about Dusky Beauty and her pedigree. I didn’t know you knew one race-horse from another.’

‘Well, I am quite certain you don’t,’ said Gilbert, with less than his usual suavity; ‘and it is my principle not to try and entertain people by conversation about things in which they don’t take the slightest interest. Otho Askam, there, does know one race-horse from another.’

‘What, is he horsey, then? Is that his little failing?’

‘He is horsey—I don’t know how much, yet,’ said Gilbert, with his gentle gravity. ‘That’s what I have got to find out, and it is what I mean to find out. I shall give him the pleasure of my company on an early day. You can please yourself when you go. Here we are.’

After Otho Askam’s arrival, which was, as it were, made public by this appearance amongst the gentlemen of his county, he and his sayings and doings furnished endless topics for the gossips of the neighbourhood. It was, of course, only by degrees that public opinion about him took a definite shape, but the process of collecting data on which to form one’s opinion of a person’s character is to many persons an even more delightful employment, and more enjoyable, than the frequent utterance of that opinion when found; though this, of course, must possess the higher quality of benefiting and instructing those who hear it.

The Bradstane neighbours—people in districts like that are neighbours if they do not live more than ten miles apart—abandoned themselves at first with joy and

satisfaction, and a keenly pleasurable sense of having found a new interest, to this first branch of the business—the collecting of data. Women asked their men—and declined to be put off with mere vague, general statements in reply—what they thought of Otho Askam ; and men said things to each other about him, and laughed, or nodded, or shrugged, as the case might be.

The first interest gradually but surely turned into disappointment. People in general discovered, or felt that they had discovered, that Otho Askam was a decidedly horsey, slangy young fellow. It was soon made manifest that he had a powerful distaste for general society, as found in the country, with its dinners, dances, and lunches. Then again it was said—by whom no one could exactly tell—that he was full of whims and humours and oddities without end—not pleasant oddities ; was very lavish of his money on one day, and very stingy with it on the next ; had a most moody and uncertain temper, which sometimes would run into fierce, white-hot passions, with little or no cause for them, or, again, into sullen silence, more difficult than the fury to understand or combat.

There was one group of facts eagerly seized upon by the scandalmongers, and even by those who were not scandalmongers, of the vicinity. The matrons and the maids around were alike grieved that a young man so richly endowed with every external advantage should prove so very ungentle, unpromising a character ; that he should set at nought their customs, despise their burnt-offerings, and openly neglect their galas and festivities. That alone would have pained the matrons and the maids ; but that was not all. There was a thorn more galling still, which he contrived to plant in their

sides, so as to wound them shrewdly. After he had been at home a few months, it became universally known that there was one house in the neighbourhood at which he visited often, indeed, constantly, and that one the last which would have been expected to attract him—at Balder Hall, namely, where old Miss Strangforth lived with her niece, who had for more than two years been engaged to Michael Langstroth. Magdalen Wynter had never been a favourite among the women of the country-side; she was exceedingly beautiful, and did nothing to conciliate them; she was penniless, and treated them as if they were beneath her. That winter she became less popular than ever, and the secret thought in many a virgin bosom was, ‘Greedy wretch! Could she not have been satisfied with one?’

This attachment to Balder Hall, and the innumerable times that his horse and he were reported to have been seen travelling over the road thither, was the canker which vexed the hearts of the womankind. A good many of the young men began presently to say that Otho was so cross in his temper that the only way to get on with him was to let him alone as much as possible; and, by and by, prudent fathers, however much they might have approved of him as a husband for one of their spotless daughters, began to think it was as well that their sons should not have too much to do with him. Nothing tangible had been alleged against him during those months; nothing actively bad; but, on the other hand, there was nothing good. In any of the staid pursuits of a country gentleman of his standing, politics, county business, public affairs of any kind, he took not the faintest or most elementary interest; nay, he had been known, when occasion offered, to express a

rough kind of contempt for them, and for those who troubled themselves with them. Altogether, Otho Askam, who had been a good deal looked forward to as the coming man, created much disappointment now that he had come.

The last fact which formed food for gossip and wonderment was, that that gentlemanly, well-bred youth, Gilbert Langstroth, against whom scandal had never raised so much as a whisper, who was known to be good—look at the way in which he devoted himself to his failing father—and was said, by those who knew him, to be as clever as he was good—this paragon amongst sons and young men became the chosen friend and associate of Otho Askam, almost from the day of his arrival in Bradstane. Gossip exhausted itself in trying to find reasons for this alliance; in discovering points of resemblance between two such diverse characters, points which might account for the intimacy which had sprung up between them. Gossip spent her breath in vain. Undisturbed, and unheeding what was said about them, the young men remained and continued to be friends, and friends who were almost inseparable. The neighbourhood presently discovered that to stand perpetually with a gape on one's mouth is undignified, so it ceased to gape, shrugged its shoulders, and said, 'Well, if I were Mr. Langstroth, I should not like my son to form such an intimacy.'

The neighbourhood could not possibly have been more surprised than was Gilbert's brother, Michael, though he kept his surprise to himself, and naturally did not hear very much of that felt by other persons. He had often chaffed Gilbert about his having no friends; acquaintances in plenty, but no chum, as the absent

Roger Camm was Michael's own chum. Gilbert had always replied—

‘Wait a bit. Every one does not suit me for a friend. When I do find one, I’ll stick to him.’

And then Otho Askam came. Gilbert appeared to have found the combination of qualities he wished for in a friend, and his words were fulfilled. He ‘stuck to him.’

The intimacy went on for more than a year, during which time the tranquil, gentle countenance of Gilbert Langstroth, with its slight, tolerant smile, was to be seen oftener than not side by side with the strange, fierce face of Otho Askam, with its breathless expression. ‘He looks,’ said a girl to Michael once, ‘as if he were always hunting something, and meant to kill it when he caught it.’

It was undoubtedly a bizarre alliance, but at the end of a year people had, in a measure, got to accept it, and it was an understood thing that its effect upon Gilbert was one which he was quite able to sustain with impunity; in other words, that, whatever might be the case with Otho Askam, Gilbert Langstroth continued to be a respectable member of society, and was not even thinking of going to the bad.

CHAPTER II

MAGDALEN—AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

OTHO'S arrival had been in the early part of October. The intimacy between him and Gilbert gradually increased, and the visits of the friends were not by any means confined to one party of the alliance. Otho was found as often seated in an old arm-chair in some one of the now faded and shabby rooms of the Red Gables, as Gilbert was in the statelier and better preserved apartments of Thorsgarth. Gilbert and his father lived alone together. They had so lived ever since Michael, having finished his medical studies, had come back and been made Dr. Rowntree's assistant. Mr. Langstroth was one of those men who undoubtedly exist, who, by some means not to be accounted for by any personal charm or fascination, always have either a devoted wife or a friend who seems willing, nay, eager to give of his strength in order to make up for their weaknesses. So long as his wife had been living, Mr. Langstroth had had a prop. After her death, her place, as prop, had been taken by Dr. Rowntree, an old 'friend of the family,' whose yellow-washed house, with its green door and brass knocker, stood almost opposite the Red Gables, on the other side of the broad old square which formed the west end of Bradstane town. Dr. Rowntree had indeed

been one of those friends who stick closer than a brother, who get little and give much, and who seem quite satisfied so long as they may go on giving, and get an occasional word significative of trust or appreciation. Sometimes it seems as if they could exist without even so much aliment for their regard. It was at his instigation and by his advice that Michael had adopted the medical profession as his calling in life. Something had to be done; their fortunes no longer permitted idleness on the part even of the eldest son of the house. Michael was utterly disinclined for the church, and his father for the expense of preparing him to enter it. For 'doctoring,' as they roughly and ignorantly called the healing art, he had always shown a liking; and, as most of his spare time had always been spent at the little Quaker doctor's house, it was considered that he had had ample opportunities of judging whether this calling would suit him or not. He had elected to follow it, greatly to the jubilation of his old friend, and, having finished his student life, it had been decided that it would be to the comfort and advantage of all if he were to take up his quarters with Dr. Rowntree, instead of remaining at home.

'You won't really be separated from them, you know,' said the doctor; 'and, being on the premises, you'll get so much better broken in to it.'

Mr. Langstroth agreed. In his heart he despised the doctor's calling, and was angry and ashamed that a son of his should have to live by it; but, like many another before him, he took the benefits that he hated, and was satisfied so long as they were not put before him too prominently. He would have been best pleased if Michael could have followed his 'trade,' as the elder man con-

temptuously called it, away from Bradstane and his nobility ; but the advantages of the present arrangement were too great and too obvious to be thrown away ; there were no premiums to pay, no struggle to make. So Michael lived with Dr. Rowntree, and began to make himself acquainted with the far from easy life of a country doctor. His temper was sweet, and his spirit beyond all idea of shame in his position, or complaint at having to work. He said little, but went to work with a will.

Gilbert had all along, and as it were by a sort of tacit consent of all parties, remained at home with his father, who was now a querulous invalid with a heart-complaint. Incidentally, too, as has been said, he devoted a good deal of his time and mind to the contemplation and manipulation of their affairs, family and financial. While Michael had been studying in London, letters had now and then come to him from Gilbert, suggesting that it was advisable to sell this or that farm, this or that lot of timber in the woods which still belonged to them. To do so would lessen their debts by so much, would ease their father's mind, and increase their income by diminishing the amount they annually had to pay away in interest. To all and each of which propositions, Michael had been in the habit of yielding unqualified assent, saying that he thought it very good of Gilbert to sit boring his eyes out over accounts, in the days of his youth. He might as well have congratulated an old spider on weaving webs so skilfully, or complimented a shark on his kindness in following that which he best loved—prey, namely, or, in short, have thanked any person warmly for being so disinterested as to find pleasure in following his natural bent. Michael was very young, and hated all such tasks as those in which Gilbert passed his time. He might

have had Gilbert's office, and Gilbert his, had he so chosen; the option had been given him; but he did not so choose, and it always seemed to him that his best thanks were due to his brother for industriously doing that which he would have so hated to do himself. Interested in his studies, and seeing a good deal of society, in which he was popular, by reason of his good looks, good birth, and entire absence of selfishness or self-consciousness, Michael often thought what a good old man Gilbert was, and what thanks he, Michael, would owe him, for thus sacrificing the days of his youth to an invalid father and a complicated account-book, in a quiet little country town at the world's end.

It certainly was a very quiet little town, as it is now, and probably always has been.

'Castle Bradstane,' says an old chronicler, 'standeth stately upon Tese.' At the time of which he wrote, he probably literally meant the castle, the grim brown pile which stood on the Durham side of the stream, cunningly planted just at an outward sweep of one of its many curves. Gradually it had fallen into decay; other houses and a small town had gathered about its feet. Ivy and other creepers and climbers now clung about its fierce old towers. Wallflowers, ragwort, and the ivy-leaved snapdragon peeped and nodded in at the narrow little slits of windows; kindly Nature did all in her power to beautify what had been so cruel and so hideous, till now the grim old fastness sat harmless aloft, and the river rushed and murmured far below, as of yore.

Any one who chooses, may learn how Walter Scott, with the seer's eye of genius, pictured Bradstane Castle, and the prospects which from its 'watch-tower high

gleamed gradual on the warder's eye ;' and to this day, the prospect upon which it looks is little changed. Though the stream sweeps by beneath it, laden with the tale of several centuries more, their woe and bloodshed, grief and tragic story, yet the outlines of the land itself, the woods, the hills, must be similar to what they were when old Leland, looking upon it, recorded, 'Castle Bradstane standeth stately upon Tese.' The inhabitants, who gradually built houses, and clustered about the old pile and beyond it, to the east, had been, taken all in all, a wild race of people, a border race. To this day they are bold, sturdy, and independent. Strange tales are sometimes told of the old families of the vicinity, gentle and simple—tales in which both gentleness and simpleness are conspicuous by their absence. Great cities have their great sins, their great faults, wrongs, and iniquities ; and we are very much in the habit of speaking in condemnatory terms of them, and of lauding the beauties of the country, and the simpleness and gentleness, and, above all, the naturalness and absence of pretension in the life there. And, certainly, city life, carried to excess, has in it a morbid feverishness and unrest which is no true life. But in country life, when it is lived in out-of-the-way spots—moorland farms, secluded dales, places far from railways and traffic—there is often a certain morbidness, as well as in the life of a town. The very solitude and loneliness tend to foster and bring out any peculiarities, any morbid characteristics, and to confirm and strengthen eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. One of the good things that much-abused progress will do in time, will be to sweep away some of these ugly old country habits of indolence and cloddishness, and selfish, soulless sensuality, which still exist, and that some-

times amidst the sweetest and most exquisite natural surroundings.

At this later time of which I write, Bradstane was more the abode of confirmed Philistinism than of anything else. There were a few wealthy and well-born families, who possessed seats in the neighbourhood—Halls, Parks, Courts, Houses—and who shut themselves up in them, and led their own lives, on no evil terms with the shopkeepers and dissenters of the village itself, but quite apart and distinct from them. The only one of these houses which stood within the precincts of the town was the Red Gables, Mr. Langstroth's dwelling-place. It was a large old house, rising straight out of the street. The land that belonged to it consisted chiefly of farms in the vicinity, and some woods, more distant still.

Farther out, at a fine old place higher up the river, situated like Thorsgarth, on one of its many 'reaches,' and called Balder Hall, lived an old maiden lady, Miss Martha Strangforth, at whose death, which, said wise report, could not be very far off, seeing that she was older than the century, and a martyr to rheumatic gout, her estate and fortune would pass to a nephew of the same name. Four years ago had come to live with her an orphan grand-niece, one Magdalen Wynter by name; a cold, handsome, self-contained girl of eighteen, who made no friends, and was seldom seen walking outside her aunt's grounds, but who sometimes passed through Bradstane town, driving in one of the Balder Hall carriages, dressed with a perfection of simple elegance which the Philistine inhabitants called 'plainness,' and looking as if, for aught they could say to the contrary, all the world belonged to her. Sometimes she stopped at one of the shops, and then she was treated with respect,

as the niece of rich old Miss Strangforth. On these occasions, she was wont to give very clear, concise orders, in a very clear, decided voice, low and gentle, but too monotonous to be called musical. Her beautiful young face was seldom, if ever, seen to smile; and yet, one could hardly have said that she looked unhappy, though she might have been accused of appearing indifferent.

Once, some few weeks after her arrival, stopping at the stationer's and bookseller's shop kept by Mr. Dixon, in the main street of the town, the footman opened the door, and she got out and went into the shop. Mrs. Dixon came forward to attend to her wants, and was followed by a pretty little girl of some ten years old, a child with a delicate skin, small, oval face, straight little nose, brown hair and eyes—all very neat and clear, and clean and pretty. She hid rather shyly behind her mother.

'Is that your child?' asked Miss Wynter, pointing with her parasol at the girl.

'Yes, miss, this is Ada, our only one.'

'Oh, indeed! How old is she?'

'Ten, was a month last Sunday.'

'Ah, she is a pretty little creature. Does she go to school?'

'Yes, miss; but it's her holiday-time now.'

'I wish you'd let her come home with me, and I'll show her some pretty things. I am very lonely.'

The last words were spoken in the quiet, uninterested tone in which one says, 'What a dull day it is!' as if they hardly referred to herself, but to something outside her.

'Oh yes, miss, she may go. I'm sure it's very good of you. But I fear she'll be a trouble to you.'

'Not at all, or I should not have asked her. Would

you like to come with me, little Ada?' asked Miss Wynter, turning to the child neither coldly nor unkindly, but with no change of expression at all—no lighting up of her soft, dark, quiet eyes; not the ghost of a smile upon her tranquil sculptured lips.

At first, Ada hung back; and her mother began to expostulate with her, saying how good it was of the lady to invite her to go with her.

The lady, in the same soft and gentle tone, remarked presently—

'Oh, she won't understand that, of course. If you will come with me, Ada, I will give you a pretty necklace, and a ribbon.'

At this prospect, all hesitation fled. Ada submitted at once to be made ready, Mrs. Dixon remarking admiringly—

'Eh, but you have found the right road to her heart, miss, and that cleverly.'

'I will sit here, and wait till she is ready. Don't put on her best frock, or anything of that kind, you know. She will do just as she is.'

Miss Wynter furthermore promised to restore Ada to her home and friends later in the evening, but Mrs. Dixon said she had to send her servant to the Balder Hall farm for butter, and she should call for the little girl and bring her back. Ada was perched in the carriage beside Miss Wynter, in which position she was seen of sundry comrades as she drove away.

They called to her; asked her where she was going, and cried—

'Eh, but, Ada, what a grand lady you are, to be sure!'

Ada took no manner of notice of them, but looked straight before her.

‘Why do you not kiss your hand to your friends, and say good-bye to them?’ asked Magdalen, turning indifferently, as she lay back, also indifferently, and looked with languid curiosity at the little flushed face and small figure, bristling with importance, beside her.

‘‘Cause I’m a young lady, and they are little common village girls,’ was the reply, so unexpected, that even Miss Wynter’s eyes were opened wide, and her eyebrows were raised, as she heard it.

‘Indeed?’ she said. ‘And do you think you are really a young lady?’

‘Not like you, yet,’ was the reply, ‘because I’m not old enough; but I shall be some time. Mamma says I’m so pretty I shall be sure to marry a gentleman; and I’m going to learn French and music.’

‘Oh, indeed!’ drawled Magdalen. ‘You are going to marry a gentleman. What is a gentleman? Did your mother tell you that, too?’

‘She didn’t tell me, but I know,’ replied Ada.

‘Well, suppose you tell me. Then I shall know, too.’

‘A gentleman is rich, and has a large house, and——’

‘Does a gentleman keep a shop?’

‘No.’

‘Then what is your father?’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’

Magdalen proceeded, in a languid, indifferent way, to draw her out. In a very short time she had gauged the depths, or rather the shallows, of Ada Dixon’s mind. It contained nothing but shallows then; it was destined never to contain anything else, henceforth and for evermore.

From that day she was more or less Miss Wynter’s *protégée* and plaything. Sometimes the connection flagged;

sometimes when the winter weather was bitter, or the summer heats overpowering, when Miss Wynter was indolent, and when Ada was promoted to a boarding-school, there were gaps in the intercourse; but the acquaintance was never broken off, and it was not without its influence in both lives, and on more destinies than theirs alone.

The Dixons were well-to-do, prosperous, conventional tradespeople, more retail than wholesale in every sense of the words. He had grown fat by charging sixpence where other people charged fivepence, by a consistent practice of telling many lies during the week, and diligently repenting him of his transgressions and bewailing his sins twice every Sunday in the parish church. That is, he bewailed his sins with his mouth, and whenever bewailing happened to be printed in the Prayer-book; but he knew much better than the Prayer-book what was the way in which to get on in the world, and perhaps, if he had spoken out his whole mind, cleanly and honestly, would have said that since the Lord, by putting so much competition into the world, had made it such a hard business for folk to hold their heads above water, He must even excuse them from doing it in the best way they could.

Mrs. Dixon, like a faithful and loyal wife, had aided and abetted him in his praiseworthy efforts to get on in the world. They had succeeded in their aim, and were respected and looked up to by all who knew them. He was vicar's warden, an overseer of the poor, one of the best-known men in public and parochial affairs in all the district. He could afford to send his daughter to school; to keep her out of the shop; to dress her 'stylishly,' as they called it; to give her a piano, and buy pieces of music for her to play upon it; and all these things he

did with a good grace, and looked to Ada to form an alliance which should be to the credit of the family and her own glory.

There were other well-to-do tradesmen in Bradstane, and many who were but ill-to-do. There was the lawyer, Mr. Coningsby, who lived not far away from the Langstroths; there was Dr. Rowntree; there was the vicar, Mr. Johnson, with Mrs. Johnson, his wife, and their numerous progeny. They lived in an old brown house, in a kind of close, near the church, with a walled garden containing apricot and plum trees. Other religious bodies were represented by two dissenting ministers and their flocks, and by a Friends' Meeting, the head and front of which was Dr. Rowntree.

These denominations, of course, had churches and chapels in which they worshipped. There were some curious old houses in the main street, and there was a long and unlovely thoroughfare called Bridge Street, more like a slum than anything else, where the women were pale, and the children stunted, and the inhabitants of which, taken all in all, did not enjoy the best of reputations. One side of this street was built to the river-bank overhanging the stream; and in the spring and autumn, or when thunderstorms prevailed, the lower rooms of those houses would be flooded. Going along Bridge Street, one did not guess how near the river one was, till one came upon an opening here and there—a gully, or a tunnel, or a narrow, dark passage—and looking down it, one could see the rushing brown waters flowing ceaselessly on, without haste and without rest, from the fastnesses whence they had sprung—

‘Where Tees in tumult leaves his source,
Thundering o’er Cauldron and High Force.’

Such was, superficially, the outward aspect of Bradstane town, when Otho Askam and the two Langstroths met after their many years' separation ; such it had been for years back. It is not what is called 'a growing town,' and whatever drama might be played within its precincts, its exterior, objective side, was not likely to change very much.

CHAPTER III

LANGSTROTH'S FOLLY

ONE November evening, or rather, late in the afternoon, Otho had dropped in at the Red Gables, where he had found Gilbert and his father. Mr. Langstroth received the young man with urbanity; he had all along seemed satisfied with Gilbert's new friend. Gilbert himself looked up from his desk, and greeted the visitor tranquilly.

'Sit down, and make yourself at home,' said he, pushing a tobacco-jar towards Askam.

But Otho did not at once sit down. 'Will you come home and dine with me?' he asked, in his curt way.

'I'm sorry I can't,' Gilbert said, polite as usual. 'You see these papers? I have more than an hour's work upon them yet.'

Otho never scoffed at Gilbert's 'business,' though he was ready to sneer at that of any one else. All he uttered now was a disappointed 'Humph!'

'Stay and have dinner with us,' said Gilbert. 'How did you come?'

'I rode.'

'From home? On your way anywhere?'

'No. I'm on my way from Balder Hall,' replied Otho, with something like a scowl.

Gilbert looked at him, carelessly, it seemed. Then he said—

‘Well, send your horse round, and stay, as I said—I want Askam to have dinner with us,’ he added, turning to his father.

‘I wish he would. We shall be delighted, if he will take us as we are,’ responded Mr. Langstroth.

Otho still seemed to hesitate a little, till Gilbert, with a rather steady look at him, which was not seen by his father, continued—

‘Look here. I’ll propose something else. I’ve been tied down to this work all day, and I haven’t had a turn out of doors. Dine with us, as I said, and afterwards I’ll walk back with you to your house. I have an errand in the town. It’ll do you no harm to travel on your own legs for once in a way, and you can send one of your fellows for your horse. How will that do?’

Otho’s brow cleared. ‘That will do very well,’ said he, taking a chair. ‘It suits me down to the ground. Get on with that work, and I’ll talk to your father.’

Gilbert, having rung and given his orders as to the accommodation of Otho’s horse, turned his back upon them, and did not address another word to them until the man announced dinner, when he put his papers in a drawer which he locked, and gave his arm to his father to support him to the dining-room. Otho followed them. Despite the poverty of the house of Langstroth, the meals there were always rather choice, well cooked, and well served. Mr. Langstroth, it was understood, depended a good deal for his health of mind as well as of body upon the due observance of such things. Soon after they had begun, Gilbert observed carelessly that they hadn’t seen Michael all day; he had expected him to dinner.

‘He’s dining at Balder Hall,’ said Otho, even more curtly than usual.

‘Ah! Had he arrived when you left?’

‘No.’

‘And how was my future sister-in-law?’

‘She said she was all right,’ was the gruff reply, as Otho fixed his eyes for a moment upon Gilbert, a little defiantly, one might almost have said. Nothing more was said about any of these topics—Balder Hall, or Michael, or Magdalen. When dinner was over, and they had gone back to the library, Gilbert settled his father with the greatest care, arranging with his own hands his easy-chair, small table, reading-lamp, and all his other requisites.

‘You won’t mind my leaving you for an hour or two?’ he asked.

‘Not at all, Gilbert. You want some air and exercise. Go and get it.’

‘Would you like me to ask the doctor to call in?’

‘No, no,’ was the somewhat testy reply. ‘I see him often enough, without you asking him to come.’

‘Michael is sure to look in on his way home, but I shall most likely be back by then.—Now, Otho, if you’re ready.’

As they stepped out of the house, they became aware that a change had fallen over the weather, which had been cold. The sky was full of rack, driven rapidly across it by a strong yet soft south-west wind. The moon gleamed fitfully through the clouds, and a gush of rain was blown against their faces.

‘Halloa! Raining!’ exclaimed Gilbert. ‘Do you mind a drop of rain?’ he added, ‘or will you ride home?’

‘Oh, I’m not afraid of a little weather,’ replied Otho. ‘Where do you want to go?’

‘Where you have never been yet,’ said his companion. ‘Down to the Townend, as they call it. Come along. It isn’t much out of our way to Thorsgarth.’

Otho followed in a docile manner. Now that he had got what he seemed to have been aiming at, his *tête-à-tête* with Gilbert, all traces of sullenness and impatience had vanished. Bulldogs, surly to all the world beside, are tame and obedient to their masters; and there was a good deal of the bulldog in the way in which Otho followed Gilbert about.

When they had got through the busiest and most inhabited part of the town, they found themselves almost alone in a steep street, descending rapidly towards the river. As they got farther down it, the houses gradually became more bare and rough-looking; and, some of them, more and more ancient in appearance. Looking down the hill, it appeared as if the street ended in a *cul de sac*, as if there were no egress that way from Bradstane town. And the wall which appeared to shut the place in, and block up the road at that side, consisted of the frontage of two high factories. There was in reality a narrow passage between them, through which access was obtained to the river, and by means of which one arrived at an iron footbridge, ugly, but useful. This could not be perceived at the distance they now were from the mills.

‘What on earth do you want down here?’ growled Otho, between two puffs at his pipe.

‘We possess a bit of property down there,’ Gilbert answered him. ‘It is perfectly meaningless and perfectly useless to us. It cumbers the ground, and has swallowed up a pot of money which we ought to be enjoying the benefit of now. I sometimes walk down to it, to look at it, and think what a folly it was. “Langstroth’s

Folly," it ought to be called. Townend Mills is the name it actually bears. There it is!' as the moon shone out brightly for a few minutes, and showed the dark mass of the factories rising almost directly in front of them.

'You're a queer one!' said Otho, not without a kind of admiration in his tones. 'Where's the sense of fretting yourself by coming and looking at it? It's like trying to heal a raw by scraping.'

'Your simile would be just, if I did irritate myself,' replied Gilbert, gently. 'My dear Otho'—he spoke impressively, and laid his hand for a moment on the other's arm—'I never let anything irritate me. I make it a rule——'

'Never—I never say never,' said Otho. 'No saying what will turn up. Leave it to chance. That's the best way. Besides, Mag—some one was saying to me, only the other day, that it's only very young people who *never* do what they oughtn't.'

It was on the tip of Gilbert's tongue to say, 'I know I am young, but, then, I have taken care to be very wise, too,' because we are apt to blurt out the thoughts nearest our hearts. But he said quietly—

'Yes, I know I am young, but I have had a good deal to do that generally falls to older people. With Michael choosing to leave us and take his own way, I have had a good deal to think about, and a good deal of help to give to my poor governor in his business affairs; and I soon found that, if you want to get on at all in business, you *must* keep your temper, especially when you are a poor man, with fallen fortunes, against the world——'

'Be hanged if I could ever keep my temper about business, or anything else that went wrong with me!'

'Ah, you can afford to lose your temper,' said Gilbert,

in a cold voice, which caused Otho hastily to say that he had meant no offence ; and Gilbert proceeded—

‘So, as I say, I don’t let the Townend Mills irritate me, though one might get irritated enough about them if one would ; but I come and smoke my pipe, and walk round them now and again, and think quietly. I feel as if I might, some time or other, have a good idea on the subject, you know—an idea that might be worked into something. Don’t you trouble yourself about them. I won’t detain you long. Here we are !’

They had entered the long, narrow passage between the mills. It was now late, getting near ten o’clock, for they had not left the Red Gables till after nine. The clouded sky made the night darker—a darkness which was deepened, if anything, by the occasional gleams of moonlight when the rack parted. At the end of the passage there was visible a kind of gray shimmer, and in the intervals between the gusts of wind they could hear the rush of the river.

‘Wherever one goes, one comes upon that river,’ exclaimed Otho, not as if he were much delighted with the fact.

‘Yes. Tees keeps us pretty well aware of his presence. It’s as twisted and crooked a stream as any in England, I should imagine. There are the mills, Askam. Now, I’ll tell you my object in life, if you like.’

‘What is it ?’ asked Otho, with deep and unfeigned interest.

‘I wish—at least, I intend to overcome the obstacle raised in my way by the idiot who built these mills. I like overcoming obstacles. I intend, some day, either to have them sold, and the price of them in my pocket, or else to see them filled with machinery, and working again at a profit.’

'But you don't understand how to manage mills,' said Otho diffidently.

'No, but I understand how to manage men. And I know a fellow who understands how to manage mills—Roger Camm. Do you remember Roger Camm? He used to be a playfellow of ours—the curate's son.'

'A swarthy fellow, very big and strong, who always looked rather hungry, and yet always said he wasn't when we used to go in to tea?

'The same. I see you have an accurate memory. I guess he was hungry too, poor beggar. He was over here, a year or two ago, stopping with Michael; they are great chums. And he told me all about himself. He cut the Church. He said his governor never got anything out of it but water-porridge and civil contempt from people who weren't as good as himself. He was rather bitter about it. Anyhow, he cut it, as I say, and took to the intelligent working-man line. He is foreman in a Manchester factory now, and he knows something about it all, I can tell you. I made him promise that when I sent for him he'd come and take the management of this concern—"run it" for me, as they say in America.'

'Ah, and when will that be?'

'When I find my purchaser or tenant,' said Gilbert, as suavely as ever. 'He told me all the reasons why these would never succeed as cotton factories—they are the only mills in the place; the station is a mile and a half away, and there is a steep hill, nearly half a mile long, from here to the top of the town. Oh, I've mastered the subject. Jute—that is what I shall do with them—spin jute, and get women and girls out of Bridge Street for hands.'

‘Yes?’ said Otho, tentatively, really interested, and ardently wishing that he understood a little more about it. ‘And your father and—brother?’ Michael’s name seemed rather to stick in his throat.

‘My father says he only wishes I could. Michael is dead against it. Michael would like to pull the whole place down.’

‘What for?’ asked Otho, sharply.

‘Because he’s a fool,’ was Gilbert’s reply. The intimacy between him and Otho had, it would seem, progressed quickly.

‘Because he’s a fool,’ repeated young Askam, leaning his elbows on the balustrade of the bridge, to which they had now advanced, and staring down into the rushing brown river. The expression on the face, which the darkness concealed, was not a pleasant one. ‘Curse him!’ he muttered to himself, so low that even Gilbert did not hear him; but the river carried the sound, along with all the other messages with which it was laden, towards the sea.

‘Come along!’ said Gilbert, after a brief, silent pause. ‘There’s no use staying here any longer.’

Otho raised himself from the bridge, and they retraced their way through the silent passage, up the steep street, and to where a road to the right led in the direction of Thorsgarth. They had not spoken a word since leaving the mills.

‘I think it’s rather late for me to be going with you,’ said Gilbert, hesitating at the corner.

‘Not a bit! What’s ten o’clock? You’ve got a key, I suppose? You said you would come,’ said Otho, rapidly, and almost savagely. ‘And I want to speak to you.’

‘Oh, I am willing, and—well, Michael will see my

father again before he goes to bed—sure to. He will be leaving Balder Hall by now, I daresay. They keep early hours there.'

'Where there's an old woman like that precious Aunt Martha, they must,' said Otho. 'Look here, Gilbert, how did your brother Michael get Magdalen Wynter to accept him?'

'By being the only man in the world who proposed to her, or was likely to do so,' said Gilbert, cynically.

'I don't see that. She is the handsomest woman I ever saw.'

'She hasn't a penny, and won't have. She isn't popular—but the reverse, and no man, except Michael, ever penetrates within those walls—oh, and you,' he added, with a laugh, as he turned to Otho.

'You haven't accounted for it yet,' said the latter, sullenly.

'Well, say she was in love with him.'

'In love with my eye!'

Gilbert laughed again. 'I give it up,' said he. 'It's a conundrum I have often set myself, to no purpose. Michael is ten thousand times too good for her; but that's nothing to the point. I don't know why she took him.'

'She ordered me off this afternoon, because he was coming to dinner,' Otho said, in a voice of choking anger. 'She told me my whole body wasn't worth his little finger. She——'

'You might be in love with her yourself,' suggested Gilbert; and, indeed, a less astute observer might have been struck with the same idea.

'I'll be hanged if I am—insolent minx!' retorted Otho, savagely. 'No girl shall behave to me as she has

done, with impunity. She shall pay for it. But, tell me, how long were they in making it up?’

‘Oh, not long; about six weeks. He was home for his holidays one summer, and we were talking together in front of the house. Miss Strangforth’s carriage, with her and Magdalen in it, drove by. The old lady saw us bowing, and stopped. I introduced Michael; he fell in love on the spot, then and there, over head and ears. Martha asked him to drive with them, and he drove. Drove deeper and deeper into love, I suppose; and—yes, it was just six weeks later, they were together at a picnic to Cauldron, and they returned engaged. My father has never got over it.’

‘How?’ asked Otho, in the same strangled voice.

‘He thought it so idiotic and imprudent. And so it was, and is. But Michael had become a man over the doing of it. They stuck to it, and they have stuck to it ever since. Some day, I suppose they will be married; but I don’t know when.’

Otho made absolutely no reply to this prophecy. They turned in at the Thorsgarth gates, and the subject was dropped. But Gilbert knew now why Otho had given them his company at dinner, and why he himself had been so earnestly pressed to go back to Thorsgarth after their walk.

CHAPTER IV

THE FACULTY OF CLOSE OBSERVATION

ONE night, during the winter which followed the conversation between Otho and Gilbert, a large ball was given at a well-known house in the neighbourhood of Bradstane, and present at it were both the Langstroth brothers, Magdalen Wynter, and even Otho Askam, little as he loved such entertainments. Perhaps Gilbert had persuaded him to go.

Magdalen was chaperoned by a good-natured matron, who had married off all her own girls with credit and renown, and could therefore afford to witness with complacent amusement the gaspings and strugglings of those who were still, as Otho might elegantly have put it, 'in the running.' She had not that dislike to Magdalen which animated more interested persons; she admired her beauty, and considered her 'good form.' Magdalen herself had never looked better than she did that night, or more haughtily and superbly independent of all outside support. She was richly attired, for Miss Strangforth liked her niece to dress splendidly. She danced very seldom; it had never been her habit to do so often; and as not even her rivals, while in possession of their senses, would have dreamed of saying that this was because she could not get partners, and as her sitting out

usually involved also the sitting out of some man who would otherwise have been free to dance with another girl, and as the said men always looked perfectly happy and satisfied in their inactivity at such times,—her habit did not in any way make her more popular.

To-night it was observed that she danced twice with her betrothed, twice with Otho Askam, and once with Gilbert. Perhaps that might have been endured without much adverse criticism, but it was noticed also, and bitterly noticed, that Otho danced with no one else, though both Michael and Gilbert did.

On the following afternoon, Gilbert, returning from a solitary, meditative ride, far into the country—such a ride as he loved to take, and did take, almost every day—found himself outside the palings at one side of the Balder Hall Park. Looking over them, he saw within the figure of Magdalen Wynter. She was pacing quickly up and down a sort of woodland path, which in summer must have been almost concealed, but which was now plainly visible between the trunks of the naked trees—visible, at any rate, to Gilbert as he sat on horseback. There was a broad belt of rough grass, in which grew ferns, and from which also rose the leafless trees just spoken of. Then came the path on which Miss Wynter was walking, and beyond that a glade, sloping steeply down to where Tees flowed by in one of his many curves.

Gilbert saw a dark, close cap of velvet, and a pale face which drooped somewhat beneath it, a long, fur-bordered mantle tightly clipped around the wearer's form, the bottom of a crimson kilting peeped beneath it, and a pair of small, well-shod feet. Her back was turned to him, and he stopped and looked over the palings till she turned, lifted her head, and saw him. She gave a little start.

‘Oh, Gilbert, how quietly you must have come!’

‘Not so very. The ground is hard and frosty, and my horse’s hoofs rang. It is your deep thoughts, Magdalen, which render you deaf to outside things.’

She had walked across the grass, which was dry and hard, and crunched frostily under her feet, up to the paling, and held up her hand to him. Gilbert rarely met his future sister-in-law, and it has been seen that in speaking of her to his friend, Otho Askam, he did not employ terms exactly of enthusiasm; but if ever they did encounter each other, whether by chance or design, he was always scrupulously amiable and polite to her. Whether this meeting had come about by chance—whether he had intended that it should come about—this is a thing known only to himself. As he looked down now, into the marble paleness and wonderful beauty of the girl’s face, he gave no sign, and she said to him—

‘Are you riding alone?’

‘Yes, just as you see me. I have been a long way—nearly to Middleton-in-Teesdale.’

‘I have been walking for an hour, up and down this path. I am beginning to find it rather monotonous, and am going in for some tea. Will you come and have some, too?’

‘With pleasure, if you can put up with such a feeble substitute for my brother. I think the North Lodge is just round here, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. I will meet you there. Then we can walk to the house together.’

They did so, Gilbert dismounting at the lodge, and leading his horse. The short winter day was closing in, gray and cold, as they went up the avenue.

‘How did you enjoy the dance?’ he asked.

‘Not much. I never do. Did you?’

‘I always enjoy watching other people’s little games.’
She gave a short laugh. ‘Do you mean mine?’

‘Yours—nay. How can you have any?’

‘Just what I was going to say. I mean, if you were looking for what you call “games” with me, your trouble must have been wasted, that’s all.’

‘Of course. No; I meant all the other girls, and their mothers, and the men, too, for that matter.’

She laughed again, shortly and contemptuously.

‘And Otho Askam,’ he pursued tranquilly.

Magdalen looked up. ‘What? Has he got plans, or “games,” as you call them?’

‘I was amused to see his devotion to you last night, and what a rage those women were in about it. His game is to avoid all the girls whom he might possibly be supposed to be desirous of marrying. He told me so. He is mortally afraid of being trapped. And of course, he is even more afraid of the mothers than of the girls. You are quite harmless, you see. You are promised to Michael. He feels so safe and happy with you.’

‘Poor, innocent lamb!’

‘Isn’t he? It shows how blindly he trusts in your probity, and in your devotion to Michael. He comes to Balder Hall sometimes, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘He never asks me to go with him.’

‘No?’

‘It is so amusing, I think. What does Michael say to it?’

‘Michael—oh, he laughs, and says it is very good of me to let him come, and that it is a good sign for Mr. Askam’s future career that he frequents any decent

society at all,' she said, with a short, dry laugh, of which Gilbert's answering one seemed an echo, so much were they alike in tone.

'How beautiful of him ! When you are married to him, Magdalen,' he added, speaking very slowly, and openly watching her face—'when you are married to Michael, and fairly established as Mrs. Langstroth, for which consummation you have waited so faithfully and so patiently,'—he dwelt upon all his words—'I should say that then Michael would find it rather a bore to have Otho Askam coming in, and you would, too. Don't you think so ?'

'How can I tell ? I should say that Otho Askam would find it a bore himself, when I am married to Michael, if ever I should be. As you say, I have waited a long time, and I may have a longer one yet to wait, before I am Michael's wife.'

She spoke with a dead monotony of tone, and a no less monotonous expression in her face. They stood now in front of the house. Magdalen beckoned to a gardener's boy, and told him to send a groom for Gilbert's horse, after which they went into the house, into Magdalen's sitting-room, and she cast off her fur cloak, and began to make tea, with the firelight shining on her crimson gown. Gilbert sat in a low chair and watched her, but said nothing. Only when she handed him his cup of tea, he said softly—

'Magdalen, I do wish you and Michael could be married to-morrow.'

'Thank you.'

'Then your life would be brighter.'

'Who told you it was dull ?'

'All your actions and words tell me so.'

‘You and I are what they call quiet people,’ she remarked. ‘Not impressionable, and all that kind of thing.’

‘I believe that is the general opinion of our characters.’

‘Well, and people also seem to think that such creatures—pachydermatous, don’t they call animals with thick skins——’

‘Has Michael been lending you some science primers to while away the time in the winter evenings? What a happy thought of his!’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘They do—pachydermatous is the word.’

‘They seem to think that, because we are not all on fire, and jerking about, for nothing, we can do without any excitement at all.’

‘I have observed the existence of the delusion you speak of. Yes, thank you, I will have some more cake.’

‘I don’t know what you think, but I feel to want more excitement than most people, and I get less. Last night, if I could have been sure that Michael would not have misunderstood me, I would have danced every dance with Otho Askam, if the result had been that not a woman would have spoken to me at the end of the evening. That’s the kind of feeling I have.’

‘I can quite understand it. I wish you would have tried the experiment—say with me.’

‘That would not have been at all the same thing. You are a very good young man, and Otho Askam is considered rather a bad one.’

‘Michael is the best of us all.’

‘It is not that I like bad people, but I like to sing in

a different key from that used by all the rest. I should like to see them all looking as if the world were coming to an end. . . . By the way, Gilbert, are you such a very good young man? They say you are too great a friend of that timid creature we have been talking about, who only dances with engaged girls, to be very good.'

Gilbert started—within himself, not outwardly, stirred his tea, and said carelessly—

'Perhaps I cultivate him for reasons like your own—because I am dull, and it makes people vexed.'

'Perhaps. He is very rich, of course. Gilbert, you have wished me such good wishes about Michael, it is only fair that I should wish you well in return. I wish Otho Askam would relieve you of those factories that I have heard you speak of. Then there would be more money in your coffers, and perhaps more chance of that marriage coming off, of which you have been speaking so kindly.'

'You are very good,' said Gilbert, laying down his empty cup; 'but gentlemen are not in the habit of twisting their friends' pockets inside out, for their own advantage.'

'Oh no! But if the friend had a leaning towards commercial enterprise—a speculative spirit. It would be an amusement for him.'

'If he had. But you know as well as I do that his tastes are not of that kind, but of the turf, turfy.'

Magdalen smiled, and said, 'I know that his tastes are for anything exciting, anything highly flavoured. What will you wager that he is tired of the turf in a year from now?'

'Nothing at all. If I did wager on that subject, I would wager to the contrary.'

‘Well, I think his superfluous cash would be more respectably employed in setting your factories going.’

Here a loud ring sounded through the house.

‘I should not wonder if that were Michael calling,’ said Magdalen, and she spoke in hurried tones. ‘Remember, Gilbert, not a word of this. I feel better for speaking to you; and Michael is good, oh, so much better than any of us! And he has cares of his own. And you will be my brother, some day. Do you understand?’

‘My dear Magdalen, of course! Do not distress yourself, pray. There is no need,’ he assured her, as Michael entered.

‘Why, Gilbert, that is well,’ said he, with a look of great pleasure. ‘I have often wished that you could spare time to ride out and have a chat with Magdalen now and then. Where did you meet?’

Michael sat half an hour, and then the brothers rode home in company. Magdalen, when the two young men had left her, sat for a long time over the fire, gazing into its glow, her elbows propped on her knees.

‘Gilbert is very observant—remarkably observant, she thought to herself. ‘Who would have thought that he would see so quickly, and Michael be so blind? And yet again, Gilbert sees, but sees only to dissect—without any feeling, unless it be a feeling of pleasure in showing one his power. Michael does not see, but if he did he would sympathise. He is grand—at least, he would be if he were awake. With all his love for me, I have not been able to awaken him. His time is yet to come. Sympathise—yes; but what is sympathy? He can’t give me what I want. Here am I, beautiful, yes, very beautiful, and very strong, and with some brains in my

head, though they all think I have none. And I have to live, to vegetate, that is, as if I were some worn-out old woman, as if I were my own great-aunt. It is horrible, horrible, and I do not know how long I shall be able to bear it.'

A dreary blank seemed to open before her mind's eye, and still she sat motionless, staring into the fire.

'Michael is my lover—he does love me, too. He is the only friend I have, for no one is fond of me. If they were kind to me, and really cared for me, I would not take their Otho Askam away from them. I wonder if they know what he is, this creature that they make such a fuss about! Perhaps there would be no fuss if he were dancing attendance on any one but me—fuss, of course there would be no fuss. Gilbert and I know what he is. He has not been able to conceal his miserableness from us. And we know that he himself—the man—is not worth fighting for. But I do not mean to let them have him, all the same. It amuses me to keep him, and to enrage them. And I shall go on amusing myself in that way. Michael is very good, but he is not—amusing. If I were married to him, I wonder if I should find it as dull as I do being engaged to him. Surely not. But——'

Here Miss Strangforth's maid came in, and said her mistress was awake, and was going to have a cup of tea, and would be glad if Miss Wynter would go to her. Magdalen went instantly, and whatever the state of her own heart, she did not let her great-aunt feel dull while she sat with her.

CHAPTER V

GILBERT'S CAUTIOUSNESS

As the young men rode homewards, Michael again expressed his pleasure at Gilbert's visit to Balder Hall. Gilbert, for his part, was meditative and rather silent during the first part of their ride, but was presently roused into animation by a remark of Michael's. Some days before, Gilbert had been expounding to Michael, as he was now and then in the habit of doing, just so much as he thought fit for him to know of his financial arrangements and schemes for the future. He had informed his brother that the estate was being very gradually retrieved, that he, Gilbert, began to see daylight—a first glimmer, through the obscurity. All his plans, he said, were working well, except one, which, if he could only accomplish it, would give an impetus to everything else, and shorten his work by years; and that one was, of course, the sale or letting of the Townend factories. He could not sell them: he could not find any capitalist to work them.

Gilbert had been very much in earnest when he spoke—in his way of being in earnest, that is, not vehemently, but gently. He spoke of the mills, even of the trouble they gave him, with respect—a respect which he would have accorded to no other topic or kind of topic under

the sun. Consequently, it had jarred on his mood when Michael, lightly flicking his boot with his riding-whip (for he had looked in at the Red Gables on his way from his daily round), and glancing round the room as he spoke with an absent look, asked—

‘Then, have we no capital now?’

Gilbert looked at him, almost sharply at first, and then with a patient expression, like that of a conscientious teacher trying to instil some branch of knowledge into a peculiarly dense pupil.

‘Not a quarter enough to set the mills agoing,’ he said. ‘And if we had, it is too risky a venture for capital like ours, that has been snatched, as it were, out of the gulf it had been flung into.’

‘But if it is too risky for our capital, surely it is too risky for that of a stranger.’

‘That does not follow at all, as any business man could tell you. It does not follow that because it would be risky for our capital, it would also be the same for that of a stranger; it would entirely depend upon who the stranger might be, and what the extent of his possessions.’

To this Michael had made very little reply. Gilbert imagined that he had forgotten it, but was undeceived as they now rode together in the winter moonlight. It was yet early, but dark, save for the clear, frosty-looking crescent in the sky.

‘I met Sir Thomas Winthrop this afternoon,’ observed Michael. ‘We rode together for a little while, and we were talking about those factories. Sir Thomas says he wonders my father does not pull them both down. The land would sell fast enough, without them, for building, and they are in want of cottages down there.’

There was a slight pause. Then—

‘I daresay Sir Thomas Winthrop does wonder,’ said Gilbert, going perfectly white with anger. ‘He would give the world to buy the plot himself and build cottages on it for his farm-labourers and people. Does he think I am a fool?’

‘He never mentioned your name at all. It was my father of whom he was speaking, to whom the property belongs,’ said Michael, a shade of reserve in his tone, for it was quite true, and had struck even him more than once, that Gilbert had a way of speaking of their estate as though it were not only managed, but owned, by himself. Michael trusted and believed in him implicitly, but was not prepared to be so sharply taken up.

‘He is a meddlesome old imbecile, and I would thank him to mind his own business,’ said Gilbert, who had somewhat recovered his composure. ‘Michael, do you trust me, or do you not?’

As he spoke, he almost pulled up, and looked his brother full in the face. Gilbert’s countenance, at this period, was an older countenance than that of Michael. His brow had already got the first coating, as it were, of the network of little fine wrinkles which afterwards completely covered it.

‘Trust you? why, of course,’ said Michael, almost impatiently.

‘Then, hearken to a word of advice. Do not let Sir Thomas Winthrop, or Sir Thomas anybody, even speak to you of our affairs. I know what I am about when I say so. Do you think I’d discuss with any outsider the way you treat a patient? I should know that you knew a hundred times more about such things than I did, even if I might not suppose you infallible. And if you trust me to be doing the best for us all, you must

not discuss what I am doing or not doing, with any mortal soul.'

'I tell you I was not discussing it,' said Michael, his dark brows drawing together. 'Sir Thomas began. I met him as I was riding from——'

'Sir Thomas be d—d!' said Gilbert, so heartily, and with such intense emphasis, that Michael stared at him. This anger, passion, and violent language, belonged to a phase in his brother's character of which he had scarcely suspected the existence. This sudden display might have put a suspicious man on the alert, but Michael Langstroth was not suspicious; and, moreover, he was one of those who, while they can fight the world well enough, can oppose an iron front to their enemies, and treat their detractors with careless scorn, are very tender, very weak, very sensitive where their friends and those they love are concerned. He saw only that Gilbert was vexed, and felt only that he was sorry to have been the one to vex him. So to change the subject, he said—

'Well, I should be glad enough to see the factories working again; but I must say I wish I had a couple of thousands to start with. I would be married to-morrow.'

Gilbert, who had other views for his thousands than, to use his own phrase, 'to give them to Magdalen Wynter to buy furniture with,' felt in his secret soul that love must make any man small; that it might make even a generous man selfish.

'What interest could you pay?' he asked.

Michael shrugged his shoulders, knowing no reply to that question; and Gilbert, in the tone of a tutor, who is master of his subject, haranguing a pupil who does

not know its A B C, went on : 'You are my brother, and, of course, I would like to help you first, if I could ; but we cannot afford it, Michael. We must wait. It is our only course. Marriage must wait, and prosperity must wait. To hand you out a couple of thousands now, would mean to throw our affairs back for years ; and as for my father and me ——'

'Oh, of course, I was joking,' said Michael carelessly. 'I know there is no royal road to that kind of thing, but only hard work, and plenty of it.'

He spoke as if he considered the subject at an end, and they rode the rest of the way in silence. Gilbert's mind was busy, and his indignation active in that he had such a mean-minded brother.

'I verily believe he would accept the situation of overseer to the parish pump, if it should give him fifty pounds a year, and bring him any nearer being married to that doll,' he thought ; and this sarcasm was, as it were, the froth or scum thrown to the surface by an anger, a fear, and an emotion which was at that time the deepest thing he could feel, and of which it was no more the adequate measure than a yard-stick would be adequate for measuring an ocean. And afterwards, when this first ebullition of feeling was over, he fell to brooding over the matter in a way which was inevitable from his nature and temperament, as well as from his upbringing, and the lines in which his life had been cast.

'What will become of my work,' he asked himself, as he often had asked himself lately, 'if my father were to die, as he might, any day? If he were to die, and everything were to be divided ! All that I have scraped together with such toil, for so many years. One half of it as good as flung into the gutter. Where would my

wages be then? Michael is not fit to have control over money which has been earned by some one else. He does not understand the subject, and never will. He would take his share, marry that girl—if she would have him—and leave me with my life to begin over again. As for the factories, if he is fool enough to listen to Sir Thomas Winthrop, and repeat what he says, as if it were something worth thinking about—why, if he can do that, he is capable of following out Sir Thomas's ideas too. It is enough to disgust any man, and discourage him from anything like real work,' Gilbert went on to himself, 'to think he has so precarious a hold as I have upon things which would not be existing now, but for his devotion. One ought to have some more secure prospect, if only to give one a little heart in one's exertions.'

Long after they had parted and gone their separate ways, Gilbert was silent, revolving this problem in his mind; and the more he thought about it, the bigger and uglier it grew.

'Michael cares for nothing but to gratify his own wishes and impulses,' Gilbert thought, darkly, feeling that this tendency of Michael's interfered disagreeably with certain plans and projects of his own, which he did not recognise as proceeding from the same source.

After that, the conversations between them on such matters grew ever rarer and less expansive. Michael did not dwell on the matter, and, if he had thought about it, would have been too proud to allude to it after Gilbert had asked him whether he trusted him; and something, whether pride or another feeling, hindered Gilbert from opening out. Every day he grew more sedate, and his brow became grayer and more covered with its network of little fine wrinkles.

CHAPTER VI

GILBERT'S 'COUP DE THEATRE'

TOWARDS the end of every hunting season, those men in Bradstane and its vicinity who belonged to the institution known as the Tees Valley Hunt, were in the habit of meeting at the King's Arms in Bradstane, and there partaking together of a luncheon, at which Sir Thomas Winthrop, the master, presided, and after which he read out the statistics of the past season, and laid before the assembled company any proposed new arrangements for the following year. Nothing was decided then; a regular meeting was called, to be held a week later, in which the affairs were discussed in earnest, and real business was done. It had come to pass with the lapse of years, that the gathering had become a very sociable one, dear to the hearts of those who partook in it; and they would not have given it up on any account.

This luncheon usually took place in the beginning of March, and was often a good deal talked about before it came off. It had been December when the meeting took place between Magdalen and Gilbert, during which each had silently given credit to the other for much keenness and acuteness of observation. It had been cold and inclement then, and a long bleak winter had followed, during which the interview had not been repeated—at

least, no such interview as that. It may be that Gilbert had many a time ridden over the wild road leading from Bradstane to Middleton-in-Teesdale, for it was his habit daily to take a long walk or a long ride. He may have travelled over this road, solitary and sedate, as his wont and humour were, his lips moving now and then, when he felt himself to be quite alone on the silent roads, as if he whispered to himself endless calculations, but never too absorbed to recognise an acquaintance and acknowledge him if he met him—never too abstracted to know his own whereabouts amidst the moors and commons, or intricate cross country roads.

And it is more than probable that Magdalen, on her part, had many a dozen times paced that woodland path on which Gilbert had found her, trying, by the regular mechanical motion which, in her own mind, she compared with that of a treadmill, to grind down or pace out some of the suppressed savageness and discontent which gnawed her soul. This walking to and fro was almost her only mode of taking outdoor exercise. With all her veiled eagerness, her bitter sense of the consuming dulness of her life, she never left the Balder Hall grounds on foot, never sought any companionship with outside things or people. For her there were no long rambles, no casual, friendly greeting with farm or cottage folk whom she might see on the way.

This seclusion on her part was a subject on which she and Michael had occasional differences of opinion, which could hardly be called disputes, since Magdalen was in the habit of yielding the field at once to Michael in the matter of argument, merely telling him that no doubt he was quite right, and simply refusing to change her ways because she did not choose to do so.

‘It is too bad of you,’ said he, ‘when there is so much work crying out to be done. I could find you plenty of employment in Bridge Street, and one or two other slums.’

‘I haven’t a doubt of it. I feel not the slightest vocation for anything of the kind.’

‘It is bad to sit aloft in meaningless exclusiveness.’

‘I daresay it is. It is the only kind of thing I care for, here. I hate district visiting, and people who make themselves common, too.’

‘You could not make yourself common if you tried, and it would put more interest into your life.’

‘No, it would disgust me ; that would be all. Every night I should think of all the horrid scenes and horrid people I had seen in the day. I should be always seeing you mixed up with them, and I should get to think you as horrid as they were—you need not look at me in that way. It’s my nature. . . . Oh, I daresay you are quite right, Michael—indeed, you always are—but I don’t take any interest in those things, and I don’t want to. I prefer to remain as I am.’

‘As I am,’ was exquisite enough in its refinement, hauteur, and beauty. Had any one else so spoken, Michael would clearly have discerned, and probably pointed out, an odious spirit of pride and exclusiveness. As it was Magdalen, he thought, certainly, that she was unreasonable, but he found the unreasonableness agreeable ; he liked the shape which it took—that of fastidiousness—and was not disposed to quarrel with it. The rare and wonderful creature was his own ; he had never even yet felt as if he fairly understood that fact, or could think enough of it. He suggested, with a smile lighting up the dark gravity of his face, that he should drive her round some day in his dog-cart, when he had not many places

to call at. She slightly lifted her eyebrows, and drew out the silk with which she was embroidering.

'No, sir. When you have a half holiday, and wish to devote it to me, I will drive you out, or ride with you. At other times—I know it is not intellectual, or humane, but it is so—I prefer the wood-walk in the park; I will remain at home.'

She did remain at home, and took her monotonous strolls along the woodland path, or might now and then be seen, alone, in an open carriage, pale and tranquil and indifferent-looking, enveloped in her dark furs and feathers, with a huge light gray fur rug filling up the rest of the carriage, and this even on days when the wind was keen and the frost biting. She was well aware that not one woman in twenty could have driven about Bradstane in winter, in an open carriage, without her countenance assuming rainbow hues. She could drive thus, and return home without a red nose or blue cheeks; and it gave her a negative, cynical pleasure to do it, and watch other people on foot, or sealed up in stuffy broughams with both windows shut.

The evening before the luncheon already spoken of, Michael was with her, and she asked him if he were going to be present at it.

'No,' said he; 'I'm engaged at the time, but Gilbert is going.'

'Gilbert! why, he surely does not generally go.'

'No, but he seems to take more interest in sport since he became such a chum of Askam's; and, of course, *he* will be there.'

'Ah, of course,' said Magdalen.

'Of all the queer partnerships I ever knew, that one is the queerest,' added Michael, reflectively.

‘Do you think so? It seems to me the most natural thing in the world. Would you have had Gilbert take up with a nobody?’

‘My dear Magdalen! I was going to say, a nobody would be better than Otho Askam; but as he’s a friend of yours, too, I suppose there are excellences in him which my baser vision can’t perceive. And I know what you mean by “nobody.” That’s poor Roger Camm. Well, I’ll leave you your friend, if you’ll leave me mine.’

‘I have not the slightest desire to know anything about Mr. Roger Camm—certainly not to interfere with him,’ replied Magdalen coldly. Michael merely smiled the sweet smile which Magdalen, in her heart of hearts, considered insipid, and the discussion ended.

At two o’clock on the following afternoon, some forty men, young and old, sat down at the long table, in the great room at the ‘King’s Arms.’ The so-called ‘lunch’ was, in fact, a very substantial dinner, as such luncheons are wont to be. Sir Thomas Winthrop sat at one end of the table, and at the other was a very young man, called Lord Charles Startforth, representing his father. Every family of standing in all the country-side had sent a representative, and every man present was more or less acquainted with every other member of the company.

At Sir Thomas’s right hand sat Otho Askam, with a cross look in his eyes, and a more sullen expression than usual on his brow and mouth. Sir Thomas was a very worthy, honourable gentleman, ready to take a paternal interest in any young man of promise; but he was not a student of character, nor acute in reading the silent language of expression, as seen on a human face. From Otho’s quietness, and his monosyllabic answers to the remarks made to him, Sir Thomas augured a milder mood

than usual, and resolved that now or never was the time for him to say his say ; for he had on his mind 'a few words' intended for Otho's ear—words which he had succeeded in convincing himself it was his duty to say. On the opposite side, a little lower down, sat Gilbert Langstroth, and next to him was Byrom Winthrop.

As the wine went round, the talk grew faster and freer. Men saw each other to-day who had, perhaps, not met for some time past, and these meetings called up recollections, brought out questions, to which the expansiveness of the moment produced confidential answers.

At the end of the table over which Lord Charles Startforth presided, a discussion suddenly began about some of those who sat near Sir Thomas Winthrop.

'What a lowering face that Askam has !' was the observation which began the conversation.

'His face can't be more lowering than his temper,' replied some one else.

'Hah ! I see there's his inseparable chum, not so far off him.'

'Gilbert Langstroth, do you mean ? Oh yes ! He's never so far away from him. I have heard that that young man has a very long head, and would not object to going into partnership with Otho Askam—Askam to supply the money, and Langstroth the brains.'

The other laughed. 'What, on Arthur Orton's plan, do you mean ? "Some people plenty money and no brains, and other people plenty brains and no——"'

'Oh, come ! That's too bad. Langstroth is a gentleman.'

'I never said he wasn't, that I know of. Gentlemen have got to live, like other people, though these radicals' (with a growl) 'seem to grudge us our very existence.'

‘Oh, hang all radicals! You say Langstroth is a gentleman—Gilbert, I mean. His brother is, at any rate. I don’t know a better fellow anywhere.’

‘No, nor I.’ The assent was general. Then some one else said—

‘He doesn’t seem to get married.’

‘No; that engagement has been hanging on far too long.’

A slight pause, and then, leaning confidentially forward, the first speaker said—

‘Somebody else doesn’t seem to get married, either.’

A sort of smile went round. Then Lord Charles, with the rash candour of youth, made the remark aloud which every one else had been making in his own mind.

‘I wonder if Michael Langstroth knows that every one says Otho Askam is sweet upon his intended?’

One man shrugged his shoulders.

‘If he did know, what could he do, or say?’

‘I don’t know what he could say, I’m sure; but what he could do would be to get married to her at once.’

Here a rather timid-looking young man, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, joined in, with a slight stammer—

‘If he had to marry her like that, it would be all spoiled for him. He t-trusts her.’

‘Ah, yes; very beautiful of him,’ said a sceptical spirit; and then a feeling seemed to prevail that the talk had gone far enough in that direction. Indeed, the conversation at the other end of the table had become somewhat loud, and the speakers with whom we have been concerned began to look and listen what it was all about.

What had taken place was this. Sir Thomas Winthrop, good gentleman, feeling his heart warmed within him, took advantage of much loud talk around him to address a few words to Otho Askam.

'I'm glad to see you with us to-day, Mr. Askam.'

'Thank you,' said Otho, with his wooden bow.

'I hope you found the sport to your liking,' added the baronet. 'We consider it has been rather a good season, on the whole.'

'It has been nothing to complain of,' was the gracious reply.

Encouraged by this admission, Sir Thomas filled his glass, and said—

'I hope this will not be the last time, by many, that we shall meet on an occasion like this.'

Again Otho bowed stiffly, drank his glass of wine, and gave ear to Sir Thomas, as he proceeded—

'I'm glad to see you and Gilbert Langstroth so thick. He's a very intelligent young man.'

'Rather!' observed Otho emphatically, with a nod, and what would have been a wink, only he remembered in time that such a testimony to Gilbert's intelligence might be thought rather compromising than otherwise by his interlocutor. In his own mind, and speaking to Gilbert in his own language, Otho called Sir Thomas 'a rum old party, and green as grass, you know,' and this private opinion, which he held very strongly, rendered it a little difficult to him to meet the other now on equal terms.

Sir Thomas went on—

'He has behaved in a very admirable way to his father, and I always like to see that in a youth. He has almost retrieved their affairs, which were in a deplorable condition.'

His voice took a confidentially funereal tone, and he shook his head.

‘Yes, I know,’ said Otho, vaguely, and at this juncture he caught Gilbert’s eye, and indulged in the luxury of the wink, which, in regard to Sir Thomas, he had had to suppress. Gilbert’s countenance did not alter a jot, but he became watchful.

‘Of course,’ resumed Sir Thomas, for whom the subject appeared to have a fatal fascination, ‘a young man, who has had to do battle with reverses, as he has, is apt to think his affairs are the centre of the universe, and that every one else is as much concerned in them as he is himself.’

To this Otho said nothing, but he regarded Sir Thomas with a curious, bull-dog expression.

‘I’m afraid he is just a little rash in some things,’ Sir Thomas went on. ‘For instance, there’s that property by the river—those Townend mills. I have heard that he is bent upon setting them to work again.’ And as Otho made no reply ‘Do you know if he has any project of that kind?’

In the fulness of his heart and head he had not moderated his tones sufficiently; and, as the loud conversation about them had somewhat lulled, this question was distinctly audible, not only to Otho, but to many others, even so far down as where Gilbert Langstroth and Byrom Winthrop sat. The former, though no names had been spoken, knew with unerring certainty, that it was himself to whom the baronet alluded; and Byrom Winthrop said within himself, ‘If only I were near enough to stop the governor! He’s perfectly infatuated about those factories of Gilbert Langstroth’s, and he’ll go and say something he ought not to.’

Otho's answer came quite distinctly too, in bluff, curt tones.

'I can't inform you on that topic. All I know of it was told me in confidence.'

'Quite right, quite right!' said Sir Thomas, with the fatuity of an elderly gentleman, in whom a solid meal, judiciously mingled with sound wine, has developed the sense of benevolence to an abnormal degree. 'That's only just and honourable. But listen to me. Your father was a friend of mine; therefore, I may be allowed to say a word to you. Don't be incautious, my young friend.' Byrom Winthrop's eyes were fixed in an agony of apprehension upon his father, as he marked the rubicund visage beaming with too much amiability, and saw the finger raised; the eye, earnest, but unobservant, fixed upon Otho; and heard these words—for the conversation around had almost ceased—'Don't let Gilbert Langstroth, or any one else, let you in for something you don't know the end of. Take my word for it, Bradstane is not the site for a manufacturing town; and gentlemen had better keep clear of factories. The best thing to do with those mills would be to pull them down, and build cottages where they stand; and if you sink any money in the concern, stick to that, stick to that!'

He leaned back in his chair with a smile, a fatuous smile, upon his visage. It was perfectly evident to the meanest observer, that Sir Thomas Winthrop had become—cheerful, and that he had just said a very uncomfortable kind of thing; not that there might not be plenty of truth in the thing, but to have said it aloud was truly unfortunate.

Gilbert Langstroth had started up, his face pale, and

was leaning forward, with compressed lips, apparently about to speak. Byrom Winthrop said in his ear—

‘Don’t make a row, Gilbert. You know the word “manufactures” always sets him off. It means nothing.’

Then a thing happened which no one was prepared for. Otho Askam, looking round, observed—

‘I see a lot of you have heard what Sir Thomas has been saying. All I can say is, I did not bring on the discussion; but now that it is on, I’d have every man here know that Gilbert Langstroth is my friend; and whoever says a word against him, says it against me. The business that Sir Thomas speaks of, has been mentioned between us. I wanted to help him with it, and he wouldn’t let me—if you call that ‘letting me in for something that I can’t see the end of.’ He said it was a risky thing for my money. I say, d—n the risk! He’s welcome to half of all that I’ve got, and if he does not choose to take it, why, I say he does not know what friendship is. Shake hands, Gilbert.’

Gilbert had been listening, white and breathless. Sir Thomas, in feeble despair, was protesting, in the futile way common to people who have stirred up a riot without having the least idea how to quell it, that really, it was most unfortunate. He never meant—he had no idea; and so forth.

Gilbert suddenly turned upon him, with his blue-gray eyes flashing from his pale face.

‘I do not know what ideas you may have had, sir, nor what you meant, but it is not the first time you have attacked me, and said ill things of me behind my back. You tried to set my own brother against me on this very subject. You will pardon my presumption in saying it, but upon my word I cannot see what our family affairs

are to you. I have fought my father's battle, and that for my brother and myself, without appealing to you for help. But,' he added, with a sudden change of tone which went subtly home to his hearers, 'you have done me a good turn to-day, when you would have done me an ill one. You have shown me who *is* my friend.' He struck his hand into that of Otho, which was still held out, and looked him full in the face. 'I hear what you say, Askam, and as long as I live I shall not forget that you have stood by me while my father's friend and your father's friend maligned me to you. I think I will say good afternoon,' he added, as a stinging parting shaft to Sir Thomas. 'It would be embarrassing for us both to remain, and it is fitter that I should leave than you.'

With which, and with a slight and perfectly self-possessed bow to Sir Thomas and the assembled company, he departed, and Otho Askam with him.

This scene, of course, made a great sensation, and that night was reported far and wide, throughout many miles of Yorkshire and Durham. Every man agreed in saying that Sir Thomas Winthrop was apt to become too expansive on these occasions, and that they hoped it would be a lesson to him. As to Gilbert and Otho, and their behaviour, opinions differed. Men spoke of their parts in the fray according to their own feelings and dispositions, some saying that it was a touching example of faith and friendship, others leaning on the opinion that Otho Askam, in to-morrow's stingy fit, would repent him of his reckless generosity to-day; while one observer said—

'I suppose there was something real in it. I'm sure there was on Askam's side, at any rate; but that Gilbert

Langstroth is a queer fellow. I'm certain, if you could see to the bottom of his heart, you would find gratitude to Sir Thomas for having given him such a chance. It was very telling, that slightly trembling voice, and that little side stroke about having fought their battles alone, and without asking Sir Thomas's help. It made Sir Thomas look confoundedly foolish, and as if he had been doing a very mean thing.'

'And don't you think he had?'

'Certainly not. He had been doing what he thought was the very best for everybody, and in the most disinterested way. Only, you know, he hates what he calls tradespeople like poison; and the idea of knocking Gilbert's factories on the head was just too much for him.'

'Well, I'm much mistaken if he has not given them a good push towards a fresh start.'

'I quite agree with you.' And there was a laugh at the expense of Sir Thomas.

The poor gentleman hid his diminished head that night, and it was not till the following morning that he had so far revived as to be able to take a tone of dignified bitterness, and grave satire on his own good-nature. 'Selfishness,' he informed Lady Winthrop, 'was the only policy that paid, and never again would he commit the mistake of offering disinterested advice to young men, even though they might be the sons of his oldest friends.'

It never transpired what passed between Gilbert and Otho at any private interview after this scene, but it was not very long afterwards, that Gilbert, with a tranquil smile on his face, sat down to his desk and wrote the following letter:—

'DEAR ROGER,

'Do you remember, when you were staying with us, my taking you down to the end of the town, to look at those two factories? And I asked you if you would come and manage them, supposing I ever got them to work again. You said you would, if you were not tied down to something else, or in a much better position. Michael tells me you are still in the same place, and not too well satisfied with it. I am going to claim your promise. My friend, Otho Askam, has bought the mills; at least, an arrangement has been made by which they will most likely become his in time, unless they pay so well that we can afford to repay him his advances. He entrusts the whole direction of them to me, and I intend to spin jute in them, as I told you before. I should like to have your aid and counsel as soon as ever you can give them to me. I hope you have not changed your mind, and that you will not think the salary too small. We find that we cannot offer you more than £120 to begin with, but it would be advanced on the first possible opportunity; and with the increasing prosperity of the concern the manager would get more, and eventually have a share in the business, if it should turn out worth anything; and I intend that it shall so turn out. I need not say that we will guarantee that you lose nothing in a pecuniary point of view, if you are willing to help us to start a new thing. I cannot say fairer than that; and in the hope that I may very soon receive your assent to this proposition, to be followed by your speedy arrival, I remain,

'Yours faithfully,

'GILBERT LANGSTROTH.'

The result of this letter was, that within six weeks of its having been written, there lounged into the library of the Red Gables one afternoon an immensely tall, broad-shouldered young man, with a great shock of loose black hair; a pale, rough-hewn, plain face, clever and attractive; and with a wonderfully delicate forehead—a young man who was in the habit of saying the roughest kind of things in the softest of voices. This was Roger Camm, the former friend and playfellow of the two Langstroths when they had all been boys together. According to his own account, he had turned himself into a working man in order to save his own self-respect, and because he had no affection for the Church, which had treated his father so scurvily. According to Michael Langstroth, he was the best and truest friend that ever a man had. And according to Gilbert, he was a shrewd, 'level-headed' man of business, who was going to help him to start his factories, and, incidentally, set his, Gilbert's, fortunes going in the right direction.

'Here I am,' was Roger Camm's laconical greeting.

'And not before you were wanted,' replied Gilbert, rising to meet him with outstretched hand and his sweetest smile. 'You are welcome as flowers in May.'

'That shows my value to be high,' said Roger. 'There are not many to be found, then, in these latitudes. Where am I to put up till I find rooms?'

'Why, here, of course. Everything is ready for you. But I believe Michael expects you to dine with him to-night.'

Thus Roger Camm was, as it were, inducted into his new position. He told himself that night, before he went to sleep, that it was odd that his life's course should bring him back to Bradstane, the little country

market-town which he despised ; and that his lot, at a critical period, should again be cast in with these others whom he had known when young, but from whom he had believed himself to be, practically, finally severed when he had left his native place to begin work in a great city.

CHAPTER VII

MICHAEL, ROGER, GILBERT

TALKING with Michael one day, soon after his arrival, on the subject of the factories, Roger discovered to his surprise that his friend strongly disapproved of the enterprise.

‘I am not one of the company, you may be very sure,’ he said.

‘I wish I had known. I would have taken care to have nothing to do with it,’ cried Roger, perturbed.

‘On the contrary, I am very glad you have something to do with it. I have more confidence in it since you came. I daresay my reasons for disliking it may sound quite absurd. I know they are not business-like. I dislike Askam, and I think the friendship between him and Gilbert is quite unnatural. The more I see of him the more convinced I am of this. I know for a fact that Otho Askam took the thing up out of pure speculative-ness, for an adventure, partly to please Gilbert, who has got a wonderful influence over him, but chiefly to vex Sir Thomas Winthrop,’ and Michael briefly recounted the scene which had taken place at the ‘King’s Arms.’ After that, nothing would satisfy Otho but to get the thing started at once. I don’t believe in the stability of an enterprise built upon any such foundation, though I

have no doubt Gilbert will push it through, if it is to be done. He says he is quite satisfied with things as they are. Let them be! I am glad you get anything good out of it.'

Roger said nothing to this, but he watched Michael when he could do so unobserved, and he became very thoughtful. He saw that his friend's face was thinner, and his smile less frequent than it had been. There was a little fold between his eyebrows, telling of a mind not always at ease. These changes had taken place in two years, though Michael had been, in a small way, getting on in the world.

Six busy months passed, during which Roger had his work cut out for him, and so much of it, that he could scarce compass each day's task in its allotted time. The labour was severe, the pay was not very large; the enterprise was a risky one. But he was one of those organisations which seem to thrive and feed on hard work and herculean exertions as others do on meat and recreation; he enjoyed it all, and it seemed to put new life into him. It really looked as if Gilbert's little boast to Otho in past days, that if he did not know how to manage mills, he did understand how to manage men, were literally true, so perfectly was this new-comer of his selection suited for the task offered to him. The stiffer the work, the higher did his spirits rise. The employment was varied, too. It was not as if he had entered upon a business which was ready and in smooth working order. The whole concern wanted 'floating,' in a small way, and on him fell the burden of doing it. There was not only the new machinery to see about—which Roger thoroughly understood, and into the details of which he went with the zeal of an enthusiast—there

were also the repairs necessary to the buildings themselves, after standing so many years empty and idle ; to the boilers and the engines, all of which it took time and money to set in order. Then there was the getting together a sufficient number of hands, chiefly women and girls, most of them out of Bridge Street, some from one or two of the neighbouring villages ; and again, some skilled artisans from Barrow-in-Furness, to instruct the novices in their work ; and all this had to be done with the utmost economy possible. It was an enormous task, which pleased Roger greatly ; and while he was working at it, he had no time to spare, even for Michael.

When he had come to Bradstane, there had been a question about where he was to live. This was settled by Dr. Rowntree, who said—

‘Come to the barrack, and put up with Michael and me.’

Roger hesitated a little at first, but there was no mistaking the sincerity of the doctor’s wish, and the young man was very willing to be persuaded ; for, to tell the truth, there was no one in the world in whose proximity he loved so well to be as in that of Michael Langstroth. He therefore soon allowed his scruples to be overcome, and so was formed this odd triangular household of bachelors, old and young, and hard work was the order of the day.

While Roger was full of business, and seeming to grow heartier and stronger the more he had to do, Michael, he noticed, when he had time to notice him, was a good deal quieter and staidier than he once had been ; not with the dulness of discontent, it would seem, nor of depression, but, so far as Roger could make out, just with the quietness which comes to nearly all men,

as life lays gradually increasing burdens upon them. Roger sometimes wondered if his long engagement pressed upon Michael, but at the sound of Magdalen's name there always crossed his face that expression which, the first time Roger had seen it, had wrung his heart, because it had told him that a spell stronger than friendship had taken possession of Michael's being. They did not talk about such things, or 'confide' in each other—such is not the way of men's friendships, nor, perhaps, of any deep friendships; and then, Michael, with his outwardly urbane and gracious manner, was deeply reserved on personal matters; and Roger, for all his rough exterior, and oftentimes untutored tongue, had what is called, and very generally miscalled, 'the tact of a woman,' in regard to such topics.

But Michael had on one or two occasions, when something had stirred him more than usual, let fall a few words as to his own inner experiences, which Roger had treasured up, and rightly so, as evidences of more than brotherly regard, and of an entire confidence in him on Michael's part.

Speaking one day about an illness of old Miss Strangforth, which had been serious, and in which both he and Dr. Rowntree had been attending her, there was a shade on Michael's brow, and a worried, worn look on his face.

'Is Miss Strangforth likely to die, Michael?' asked Roger, roused to a sudden interest in the matter.

'Oh no! At least, I most sincerely trust not. No; we will pull her through this time.'

'Miss Wynter is helping to nurse her, of course?'

'Yes, of course—like an angel.'

‘I should be afraid it was rather close work for her.’

‘They have a trained nurse to do the hardest part of it; and she is strong. Magdalen is very strong,’ Michael repeated to himself in a meditative kind of way. ‘And, of course, she does what I tell her about air and exercise, and all that. I hope it won’t injure her.’

‘Well, she has the best of all possible safeguards in having you there,’ said Roger, with a smile, which was, perhaps, a little forced.

He had intended his remark to be a cheering one, but, to his surprise, Michael’s answer was a deep sigh. This was enough to rouse Roger’s uneasiness. Holding his pipe suspended, he asked, anxiously, ‘Michael, what’s up? Are you in trouble?’

‘It’s only that what you say reminds me that I am no safeguard at all for her,’ he said, dejectedly. ‘I sometimes think what a selfish brute I was, ever to speak to her. If I had held my tongue and kept out of the way, she might have been married by now, to some man who could really have been that protector, which I can only seem to be. After all, what can I do for her? I cannot save her from experiences like this. I cannot justly afford to marry, for several years to come. It would be gross selfishness to take her away from Balder Hall to any such place as I could give her. And yet, if Miss Strangforth were to die—she is so old, and so feeble—if she were to die, there would be nothing else left.’

‘And a great deal too good for her,’ was the silent comment in Roger’s bosom. He found Michael’s remarks very difficult to answer. He had an idea, whether right or wrong, that Magdalen, whom he could not love, let him strive never so loyally for his friend’s sake to do so, was not the frail and timid creature that Michael seemed

to imagine her. Roger felt sure that the idea as to the impropriety of removing her from Balder Hall to a humbler abode was hers, not Michael's. He was certain she did not stand in much need of guardianship, but was well able to fight her own battles and take care of herself. He heard all the gossip about Michael and Miss Wynter, which, of course, never penetrated to their ears; heard, too, Gilbert's frequent scathing strictures on his future sister-in-law. He knew all about Otho Askam's constant visits to Balder Hall. So did Michael; but then, Roger knew what was said about those visits.

He remarked at last, with the cowardice characteristic of us all in such cases, and, perhaps, also with a shrewd inkling that it would not be of much use to speak differently—

'Of course, it is hard lines, Michael, having to wait so long. But even if you were married to-morrow, you can't forbid care and trouble to come to either her or you. There are no lives without them. But Miss Wynter is a brick, I know' (this with great emphasis, as he felt anything but sure of it); 'she ought to be proud of waiting for you, and I expect she is.'

'Do you know,' said Michael, with the air of a man who announces something which will surprise his hearer, 'I believe that if she were not engaged to me, Otho Askam would propose to her to-morrow.'

Roger looked at him with parted lips. Michael evidently thought the news would be as great a discovery to his friend as it had been to himself.

'Well,' observed Roger shortly, 'you don't mean to say you think that would be to her advantage?'

'Perhaps not, in some ways; but——'

'Not in any one way,' almost shouted Roger, bringing

his fist on to the table with a thump. 'That would be Hyperion to a satyr, without the shadow of a doubt.'

'I know nothing about that,' said Michael, still in the same dejected tone, 'but I do know that she is all the world to me, and I cannot give her up; no, by Heaven, I cannot!'

He spoke with a flurry, an agitation, and a passion, most unlike his usual even cheerfulness.

'Give her up? Who wants you to?'

'No one. It's only my own conscience that sometimes suggests what I ought to do.'

'If your conscience suggests that, it is deceitful, and a blind guide. But come, Michael, old fellow, you are morbid to talk in this way. The idea of a man of six and twenty looking at things so darkly! Absurd! You have your life before you.'

He went on talking in this strain till he saw the cloud gradually clear from Michael's brow, and heard him admit that he was sure he must be a fool; and so, began to look a little brisker.

But Roger was thoughtful as he went about his work.

'Give her up!' he said to himself. 'He'll never give her up till she flings him off. Poor Michael! That is the only cure for him; and perhaps it wouldn't be one, after all. Should I be brute enough to wish it for him?'

And then he thought about the change in Michael's face, so altered from its youthful pride and carelessness; but, as it seemed to Roger, more beautiful now, with the graver, broader seal of manhood stamped upon it—that seal which care never lets out of her fingers, and which she is perpetually imprinting on every brow that carries on it a line worth reading.

If Roger were concerned about the change in Michael, Michael, on his part, was much struck—concerned, is hardly the word—by what seemed to him a great alteration in Gilbert. It appeared as if hard work suited Gilbert as well as it did Roger, for the more his business grew, the livelier he became.

‘Lively?’ said Miss Wynter, to whom Michael had one evening been speaking on the subject.

‘Yes, lively. It’s the only word I can find with which to describe the change; and I don’t wonder that you exclaim at it, for “lively” is hardly a word that fits Gilbert, is it?’

‘No, indeed! Pray, what shape does the liveliness take?’ asked Magdalen, who appeared almost interested.

‘Oh, I can hardly tell you. A quickness and alertness—I can hardly describe it. He makes jokes sometimes, and laughs at a mere nothing—which is not Gilbert’s way, you know, as a rule. He talks a great deal, too, which is also contrary to his usual habits. He takes my arm if we meet, and altogether there is something odd and changed in his manner.’

‘Perhaps he is in love,’ suggested Magdalen languidly.

Michael shrugged his shoulders, smiling slightly.

‘He may be, but I don’t think it.’ And so the topic dropped, till Michael returned to the town, and during the evening related this supposition of Magdalen’s.

‘I don’t know whether he’s in love or not,’ said the doctor, who, for his part, was certainly not in love with Gilbert; ‘but he was in here to-day to see you, when you were out; and he says your father intends to make his will, and he wants you to know about it.’

‘To make his will? I should have thought he had made it long ago.’

‘So he did, for I was one of the witnesses ; but it has to be altered, with all these complications about factories and property to be sold, and such-like.’

‘Oh ! well, Gilbert will see to it ; he has always managed that kind of thing,’ said Michael carelessly. ‘I don’t see what I have to do with it.’

‘I should say you had a good deal to do with it. You certainly ought to look after it.’

‘Look after my father’s will ! what for ? He’s got no one to leave anything to, except Gilbert and me. He’ll divide between us, I suppose. I should not like to think that Gilbert got less than me, seeing how he has slaved all these years in order that there may be anything to leave at all.’

Dr. Rowntree looked impatient, and, Michael having left the room, the doctor remarked to Roger, in homely phraseology, that he did not know whether to call Michael a trump, or to tell him he was a born fool, when he talked in such a way. To which Roger merely replied that he supposed men were best left to decide such matters for themselves.

‘I mistrust that Gilbert ; he is too sly for me,’ said the doctor.

‘He has a quiet way. I don’t think he is exactly sly,’ answered Roger, and the subject of their conversation came in at the moment. Michael, he was told, was in the study, and he went there and briefly told him again what Mr. Langstroth thought of doing.

‘All right,’ said Michael, examining some substance under his microscope with the intensest interest. ‘So that he leaves as much to you as to me, I’m agreeable. I hope we shan’t have to read it for a long time to come.’

Gilbert cast a look of anger, contempt, and wonder

mixed, towards Michael, who did not even see it. There was a short silence, till Gilbert observed, in a constrained voice—

‘Well, remember, I am not answerable for anything he does.’

‘Does!’ echoed Michael, his attention at last thoroughly aroused; ‘when you say “does” in that way, you mean “does” something wrong. What could or should he do against his own sons? Have you any idea that he means to do something unjust to us?’

‘No; oh no!’ A pause. ‘But it is an important thing. He told me he meant to make this will, and I was determined he should not do it till I had told you. Of course, he does not dream of leaving his property away from us. Why should he, as you say?’

Michael, still peering into his microscope, was quite unaware that close beside him a brother man stood, who had wrestled with spiritual agencies, and had been defeated, during the last two minutes.

‘Our father has his faults, like most people,’ pursued Michael reflectively; ‘but I never heard any one accuse him of injustice or meanness. He wouldn’t be likely to leave his property to a charitable institution, for instance?’

‘Of course not,’ said Gilbert, impatiently.

‘Well, then, I really don’t see that we need, or, indeed, can say anything about it. In fact, I shall not,’ he added, looking up rather suddenly at his brother, as if he had all at once seen the thing in a new light, and arrived at a clear decision. ‘He is my father, and I trust him. For Heaven’s sake, Gilbert, don’t get to distrusting people, or you may make yourself miserable for ever. Take my advice, old fellow, and let him alone.’

‘Yes,’ said Gilbert slowly. ‘I think that, as you say, it will be best to leave him alone.’

He said scarcely anything more, and soon went away.

‘A pretty fool he is!’ he sneered to himself, when he was outside, as he walked up and down the pavement in front of their house, smoking an ante-prandial pipe. ‘Lord! what with “hearts,” and not distrusting any one, and respecting the aged (who are usually fools), my brother Michael is likely to lose the use of what little reason he has, it seems to me. There never was an elephant with a denser head than he has. He has eyes like a hawk’s, and mine are more like those of a boiled codfish; but I think I know which pair can see farthest into a stone wall.’

The next morning Michael called at the Red Gables, and found his father alone. He had been reflecting upon Gilbert’s words, it would seem, for he presently said to Mr. Langstroth that he had heard he intended making a new will. His father assented, and Michael observed, ‘If Gilbert had not told me, sir, as if it had been a thing you rather wished me to know, I should never have mentioned it, of course. But since he did, I just want to say one thing. Whatever prosperity we have is due to Gilbert. He, more than I, has been the eldest son. It is just due to circumstances, I suppose, that it has been so; but I would not like it to be forgotten.’

‘I do not forget what Gilbert has been, and is to me, nor the qualities he has displayed,’ was Mr. Langstroth’s reply; and Michael went away with his mind at ease, feeling that he had discharged his duty.

The day after that, Gilbert, who had not seen his brother in the interim, ordered his horse early. Mr. Langstroth asked him fretfully where he was going.

‘Only for a little ride,’ said Gilbert; ‘and, by the way, Coningsby is coming at eleven. You told me to tell him, and I did.’

‘Shan’t you be here?’ asked his father, in a tone almost of dismay.

‘Well, no, I think not,’ replied Gilbert, with his sweetest smile. ‘It would hardly do. But if you have not quite made up your mind, I could send him word——’

‘Oh no, no! My mind is quite made up—quite. Let him come.’

‘I think it would be best,’ said the considerate son. ‘Good morning. I hope it won’t tire you much.’ With which he went out.

The ‘little ride’ prolonged itself indefinitely, as it seemed. Far along the hard, white moorland roads he went, past Middleton-in-Teesdale, a road which seemed to have some peculiar fascination for him, since he chose it oftener than any other. On he went, till he got to High Force and its solitary wayside inn. Here he dismounted, to have his horse watered; for himself, when they asked him what he would take, he said, ‘Nothing,’ and thanked them. To let his horse stand awhile, he strolled down the dark, pine-shaded path, to the grand waterfall, and stood beside the river, watching dreamily the thundering surf, snowy, dazzling, brilliant in the brilliant sunshine. He stooped, took water in the hollow of his hand, and drank it. This he did several times, but without a change in the calm serenity of his expression; and then he returned to the inn and again mounted his horse.

Riding on, he proceeded till nothing but pathless moors surrounded him, stretching lonely and bewildering in all directions. He was on the borders of Westmoreland, and now the westering sun and the lengthening

shadows told him that it was time to be returning. Tranquil and quiet as ever, he did turn, and guided his tired horse towards Bradstane. It was dark when he got in, and he trod softly, as if he imagined there might be some one ill or dead in the house. He only laid his hat aside, but did not put off his riding-coat, before he went, still in this quiet, gentle way, into the library, where he found his father alone.

‘Where on earth have you been?’ Mr. Langstroth said fretfully. ‘Michael has never been near all day, and there I was, left with Coningsby, to give all my instructions alone.’

‘Mr. Coningsby would hardly have been likely to take his instructions from me,’ said Gilbert, with his slight smile. ‘Then, you have got it done?’

‘Yes, it is done. Rowntree and Ransom’ (his servant) ‘witnessed it. But I want no more of such efforts. It has worn me out. . . . However, it is some satisfaction to think that things are settled as they should be.’

During this speech, Gilbert had stood with his foot on the fender, and his hand held up as if to shield his face from the glow of the fire. He now observed softly—

‘I will go and change my things, and be with you in a few minutes.’

When he was alone in his bedroom, he took out his handkerchief and passed it across his forehead.

‘Disgusting! How overheated one gets with a long ride!’ he muttered to himself.

The hall bell sounded through the house. Self-possessed Gilbert gave a great start, and became suddenly paler than usual.

‘Pshaw!’ he uttered aloud, the next moment; ‘he has his key, of course.’

But it seemed to take him some time to change his riding-clothes for the garments he usually wore in an evening. Just before he went downstairs, he seated himself on a chair at his bedside, and drew a long breath.

‘Well, it had to be,’ he whispered to himself. ‘There was nothing else for it. And he is so dense—so dense. One must do the best. It was for the best.’

Then, as if feeling himself guilty of some weakness, he drew himself together with a little shake, composed his countenance, and went downstairs. Nothing was said by father or son relative to either the ride taken by the one, or the business accomplished by the other. Quite late, Otho Askam called to smoke a pipe and have a chat about the mills and other topics. And Gilbert slept quite soundly that night.

This was in May. During the summer Mr. Langstroth became somewhat stronger, and things went on in their usual course until November.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIRST-FRUITS OF THE WISDOM OF GILBERT

ONE afternoon, about the middle of November, Gilbert, looking in at the 'barracks,' said to Michael—

'I wish you'd give a little particular attention to my father. It strikes me that he is not so well as he ought to be, or rather, that he's worse than usual. I wonder if Rowntree would mind looking in, as well?'

'Of course, we will come. Now, do you mean? I'll go at once, and the doctor at night.'

He went across to his father's house and saw him. Mr. Langstroth was certainly very weak and unwell, but not, it seemed to Michael, seriously so. He left directions for him to be kept very quiet, and returned to his dwelling, promising that he and Dr. Rowntree would both look in during the evening.

As they sat at dinner, a messenger came hurriedly from the Red Gables, summoning them to go at once to Mr. Langstroth, who was very ill. In a very few moments they were in the house, but only to find that all was over, and that Gilbert, white and haggard-looking, was standing by the chair in which their father lay, lifeless. Gilbert said they had risen from table, and he had supported his father to his chair, into which he had sunk, dead. The young man's pallor and tremulousness were

fully accounted for to Michael, by the fact of the sudden blank which must now come in his life, after his years of devoted attention to his father, who had thus so suddenly departed ; and by every silent sign that he knew how to give, he sought to assure Gilbert of the sympathy and fellow-feeling he experienced.

There was a hush and solemnity in both the houses during the few days which elapsed between Mr. Langstroth's death and his burial.

There was but a small following to attend him to his grave. Roger Camm and Dr. Rowntree formed a part of it, and there was Miss Strangforth's carriage, and several others sent by neighbours and friends, Otho Askam's brougham amongst them.

When it was over, the two brothers, with Dr. Rowntree and Mr. Coningsby, returned to the Red Gables. It was decided that it would be best to, as the doctor said, 'get through with the business of the will,' then and there, so that their minds might be free for other things.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon of a dank, chill November day, when they parted ; and Roger Camm, with an inclination of the head to Michael, to show that he was with him in spirit, if not in the flesh, went to the doctor's house, intending there to wait lunch for him.

He went into the study, where Michael and the doctor kept their professional library, and where odd volumes of Roger's had got mixed up with treatises on medicine and surgery. He picked up a volume at haphazard, and gazed at the title of it. 'Principles of Biology,' it ran—'Principles of Biology'—and though he believed he was trying to read it, he was really very busy thinking

thoughts—thinking of Michael ; wondering how far his father's affairs were retrieved, and if at last there were some prospect of his happiness being accomplished.

‘Since he is so wrapped up in that insipid girl, and since she has not done him the kindness to throw him over before,’ Roger thought, in the pride of his own wisdom, ‘there’s no chance of it now, since his father’s death must make him more prosperous in a worldly point of view. She’ll have him, sure enough. They will be married, and he—will live to repent it.’

Insensibly, he let the book drop, and his thoughts turned to the days of long ago ; to his comrades and their lives, and his life, and to their play in the Thorsgarth garden, in summer sunshine.

‘Queer, very queer,’ he reflected, ‘that we two, who were companions then, should be chums now. I wonder what Michael will turn out ; how he will win his spurs ; what will give him the stamp of finished manhood ? for he’s a dreamer yet, thought he does not know it.’

Then he began to think that the doctor was long a-coming, and that if he did not appear soon, he, Roger, would have to eat his lunch alone, and be off to his work.

The door opened. The doctor’s parlour-maid stood there.

‘If you please, sir, they’ve sent from Mr. Langstroth’s. Mr. Michael begs you will step across at once.’

Roger sprang to his feet with a vague wonder and foreboding in his mind. He soon measured the distance between the doctor’s house and the Red Gables. He found the door open and a servant waiting.

‘This way, sir. They are in the library.’

In another moment Roger found himself in the well-

known room, with the three familiar figures assembled there.

Mr. Coningsby, the lawyer, who had been present, was gone. Roger looked from one to the other of his old friends, all so silent. It was very strange, and, as he dimly felt, there was something potent, thrilling, and portentous in that silence. He looked last at Michael—why, he knew not—and when his eyes fell upon him, he could scarcely restrain a start and an exclamation. Michael had always been noted for being so easy-going, so slow in judging others, so full of sweet-tempered charity. He did not look very much at peace with himself or the world just now. He was the first to speak.

‘I sent for you, Roger,’ he began, and his voice was very quiet, and very incisive. Roger hardly recognised it. ‘I want you to hear something I have to say. You are my friend; and a friend, as we all know, sticketh closer than a brother.’

‘Can this be Michael?’ Roger thought, in his bewilderment. ‘I fancied no one but Gilbert could sneer in that way.’

Roger had yet to learn that there is no sneer so bitter as that which is called forth by intense suffering, or a very keen sense of injustice. He thought all sneers were the products of a cynical frame of mind, or, with some persons, constitutional. But, thinking that such a tone was more like Gilbert than Michael, he was, as it were, suddenly reminded of Gilbert’s existence, and he glanced at him. He was seated in a corner of the old sofa, which had always been his favourite position; his arms were folded, his face pale, and apparently absolutely devoid of expression. Dr. Rowntree, though silent, was evidently in a state of the most cruel mental perturba-

tion, and looked in a helpless way from one brother to the other.

‘Yes, Michael,’ said Roger, at last. ‘I am ready, either to do or to let alone, as you wish. What is it?’

‘Boys!’ exclaimed the little doctor, unable to contain himself any longer, ‘before it goes any farther, listen to me. Before you quarrel, before you dispute, for Heaven’s sake consider! You may say things, brothers as you are, which can never be unsaid.’

‘That is exactly what I mean to do, sir,’ said Michael, turning his white face for a moment, in the doctor’s direction. Roger, loyal to the heart, could not but think in this moment that Michael looked almost cruel. Again he did not understand that there is no feeling of hate or of cruelty so strong, and so desolating, as that called forth by spited or cheated love and trust.

‘You may trust me not to dispute,’ the young man went on; ‘I never do. Hark to me, Roger!’ He turned now to Roger; and to the latter it seemed as if all Michael’s movements were stiff and mechanical, and under restraint. ‘My father has died, as you know, and has left a will, as you also know. He has left a good deal more money than it was expected he would—by me, at any rate. I am his eldest son; Gilbert his youngest. I wish you to know how he has disposed of his property, and to hear what course I intend to pursue, in consequence of that disposition. Here is the will. I won’t trouble you with much of it, but I must ask you to listen to this passage.’

From the will, it appeared that the Langstroth estates were now free of encumbrance. The income derived from what remained of them was all required, and would be for some few years, to pay off the remaining

interest on some debts, of which the capital was already cleared away. Over and above, there was a clear sum of six thousand pounds, gained about a year ago by the advantageous sale of two farms and some wood, mentioned in the will. Of this, four thousand was left to Gilbert, at his absolute disposal; three thousand, as the will stated, as his just half of the property, and another thousand as a sort of payment or indemnity for his services in retrieving the estate, which, without his care and diligence, would probably have been rather a debt than an inheritance. The other two thousand were left in trust to Gilbert, to be invested and disposed of for Michael's benefit, and the incomes derived therefrom were to be paid to Michael by his brother; the testator declaring himself to have the greatest faith and confidence in the business abilities of his son Gilbert. The Townend factories would pay nothing for a long time to any one but Otho Askam, whose money had found the means of starting them again. When they should, or if they ever should begin to pay, their profits were to be equally divided between Michael and Gilbert, or, failing them, their heirs. That is, in plain terms, there was a probability that some eight or ten years hence, Michael might begin to receive an income from 'Langstroth's Folly.' The house called the Red Gables, situate within the township of Bradstane-on-Tees, and all the furniture, plate, pictures, china, ornaments, and all other household appendages whatsoever, save such as might be personal possessions of Gilbert, were to go to Michael absolutely, as the eldest son.

Such was the tenor of the testament, to which Roger listened breathlessly, as Michael read it in a low, quick, clear voice. When he had finished, he laid the

will on the table again, and Roger, looking intently at his friend, saw such a look in his eyes, such agony in the drawn lines of his mouth, that he went up to him, and, laying his hand on his shoulder, asked in a low voice—

‘Michael, what does it mean?’

‘It means that my brother is very clever, and I am a great blockhead. I am fain to doff before his superior wisdom.’

Gilbert, his arms still folded across his chest, was looking at them, pale, calm, and seemingly self-possessed.

‘Take heed of what you say, Michael,’ he said, quietly. ‘Abuse, even from——’

‘I am going to do nothing but praise and congratulate you on your great wisdom and astuteness,’ replied Michael, flashing a look of such trenchant contempt towards his brother, that Gilbert’s own eyes sank before it. It was a new sensation for him to find himself despised by the man for whose simplicity he had always entertained such a finely ironical contempt.

‘Only,’ resumed Michael, speaking so clearly that not a word could be lost of what he said, ‘it is a pity my father did not appreciate you better. He should have left you the other two thousand out and out. Unless you take pity on it, it will be useless, for I shall never touch it.’

‘Now, Michael, Michael, madman! Beware what you say!’ cried the little doctor, stamping about, as middle-age does when cash is blasphemed or lightly spoken of.

Michael, having patiently waited till this apostrophe had been contributed to the conversation, but who heeded it not at all, suddenly bent towards Gilbert, fixed his

burning eyes upon him, and said, in a lower voice, but one which was still distinctly audible to them all—

‘*Two thousand*, Gilbert ; it is an odd coincidence. Do you remember my saying to you long ago, that if I’d two thousand to start with I would be married to-morrow—eh?’

Gilbert neither moved nor raised his head.

‘I know you thought that a very imprudent way of spending two thousand pounds. It seems my father must have held the same opinion, and between you, you have arranged that I should do nothing mischievous.’

Here he raised himself up again, and, turning to the others, went on—

‘I want you all to understand this. That which I am not trusted to handle for myself ; that which is confided by my father to my younger brother to take care of, lest I should misuse it—left so by my own father, to whom I have been a dutiful and honourable son,—I take God to witness it ;—that is not for me at all. I refuse to touch it. You all hear what I say?’

There was a low murmur from the doctor and Roger. Michael went on—

‘That being the case, it seems that what I have left, to call my own, is my father’s house—the house in which we were both born and brought up, where we lived as brothers, without an unbrotherly thought—on my part at least ; and the house where, when I went out into the world to relieve the burden which had fallen on our affairs, I left you in my place, to tend my father ; to watch over all our interests ; to deal justly by me as well as by yourself——’

There was a very long pause. It seemed as if Michael, steady though his voice had remained, were unable to

finish the utterance of the thoughts that were in his mind. The others were silent, and Gilbert looked doggedly downwards.

‘That house, as I say, is now all I have, but it is my own, and you have just given in the account of your stewardship,’ went on Michael, his lips white and his eyes hard, so that Roger felt a kind of fear of him. ‘There it is!’ He laid his hand upon the will. ‘To me, it has been a fatal stewardship. It has robbed me not only of my inheritance, but of my brother.’ And he advanced two or three steps nearer to Gilbert.

The latter rose; perhaps he knew what was to come. Neither of the others dared to speak. Gilbert once lifted his head and looked at his brother, but instantly his face sank again. He was voiceless, powerless, defenceless. Michael stepped aside and threw the door open wide.

‘Being my house,’ he said, ‘I order you to leave it now, this instant. Go!’

Another pause. Silence still. Michael stood waiting. Gilbert looked around him, as if he struggled to speak, but could not. He saw nothing to cheer him. Dr. Rowntree with his hands clasped, his kind face looking the picture of woe; Roger Camm frowning and silent. Gilbert took two steps towards the door.

‘Michael,’ he said.

‘Go!’ repeated Michael, in a stony voice.

Gilbert walked slowly out at the door, into the hall, took his hat, and left the house. They heard the hall door close after him, and it was with two of them, at least, as if the sound struck them like an actual blow. To turn one’s brother out of doors would generally be done figuratively—morally, perhaps. Michael had done it literally, and with a resistless determination and

strength of will which none of them had credited him with. His hour had come at last, and the real stuff of which he was made, good or bad, was beginning to show itself.

After a moment's silence, he turned again to the others and said—

‘I won’t detain you any longer. I wish I could have spared you such a scene, but as my two nearest friends, I wished you to be under no mistake as to what I was going to do. And now I should like to be alone for awhile.’

Roger heaved a deep sigh, and said nothing, but moved towards the door. The doctor, who had a tender heart, and down whose cheeks the tears were running, fell back into old Quaker phraseology, as he almost sobbed out—

‘Michael, my poor, poor lad, thou’lt come and sleep in thy own bed to-night, at my house, won’t thou?’

‘Yes, I will, doctor,’ replied Michael slowly; and they left him alone.

CHAPTER IX

THE GODDESS OF THE TENDER FEET

‘THE goddess Calamity is delicate, and . . . her feet are tender. Her feet are soft, he says, for she treads not upon the ground, but makes her path upon the heads of men.’

These words, or something like them, were floating dimly in Roger Camm’s mind, as he walked with Dr. Rowntree across the square to the house on the opposite side. His heart was full to bursting. Loving Michael as he did, better than any one in the world, he felt to the full the meaning of the summons he had received, to hear his friend’s decision. It is not for a light thing that a man turns out of doors the brother in whom he has all his life felt unqualified trust and confidence; it is not a casual acquaintance whom he summons to witness the deed, and so Roger felt. But while he quite appreciated this accident of the thing, the thing itself bewildered him even yet. It was one of those bizarre, jarring circumstances which come upon one like a clap of thunder from a cloudless sky, which one fails to take in properly on the first blush of them. Even yet, Roger could not feel at home with the recollection of Michael standing erect and stiff, the spirit of anger flaming from his eyes, deaf to every remonstrance, and casting scornful eyes upon Gilbert’s pitiful condition.

Neither he nor the doctor spoke till they were in the house again. It seemed that they had been but a short time away, for there was everything as Roger had left it, and the luncheon table set for them. This bald reality and commonplace of everyday life did not seem to put things into any more comprehensible shape; if possible, they heightened the strangeness and sadness of the situation. But standing together there, they (to use the vernacular) 'found their tongues.' Dr. Rowntree sat down in his easy-chair, and wiped his eyes with a large red bandana handkerchief, blew his nose violently, and said, in a voice which was yet full of tears—

'Who would ha' thought it, Roger? who would ha' thought it?'

'Well,' said Roger, propping his broad back against the mantelpiece, and staring down at his boots, 'not I, for one, and I think there will be precious few to jerk their heads and say, "I told you so," this time. And yet I don't feel half so much surprised as enraged, now that it is all out.'

'He should not have flung away what was left him in that way,' complained Dr. Rowntree. 'He should have been cool.'

'Cool, doctor! Now, come! would you have been cool? Were you cool, as it was?'

'No, no, I know. But he ought to have kept cool. He should have carried it before a court of justice. They do set aside wills sometimes, that are flagrantly unjust; and I think they would, at any rate, have handed him over that two thousand to do as he liked with. I'm sure they would; it stands to reason. An elder son, with not a penny of cash left him, except, as you may say, at the discretion of his younger brother—monstrous, monstrous! As if he had been a spendthrift, or a ne'er-do-weel!'

‘If it were twenty thousand, it would make no difference,’ said Roger slowly, for he had been working the thing out in his mind. ‘I can see where it is. Do you suppose Michael could have got beside himself in that way, just because he was disappointed of money that he had expected? He thinks too little of it for that. If every penny had been left at his own disposal, I have very little doubt he would have left it entirely in Gilbert’s hands, for he thought all the world of his business capacities. It is the treachery, not the money. When I think how Gilbert has sneaked—sneaked, all through it——’ Roger stamped his foot. ‘It shows you ought never to trust any one, least of all your nearest relations. Where Michael trusts, he trusts with his whole heart, just in the same way that he loves. He trusted Gilbert and he trusted his father, and they have cheated and duped him like a couple of blacklegs. I hope Master Gilbert’s greed will avenge itself on his own head, and I wish a pest upon every penny of his ill-gotten inheritance. It isn’t the money only that Michael has lost; it’s his faith and his trust: it is his brother, that’s what it is. That isn’t a loss you get over in a moment, even if your brother dies; and Michael has lost Gilbert in a worse way than if he had been burying him to-day beside their father. That’s about it. He will never get over it, to be the same again.’

‘I’m afraid not—I’m afraid not.’

‘He would not be what he is if he could,’ said Roger.

‘How can one console him?’

‘Nohow. It isn’t to be done.’

‘What can I say to him, my poor lad?’

‘Nothing, if you’ll believe me. I can tell you I shall not speak of it. There are things no one ought to meddle

with, unless they are opened out to one. I know why he sent for me—it was in order that he might not have to enter into the whole business again. He wanted it done with, sealed up, that I might know he had no brother any more. You can't very well talk to a man of a relation he hasn't got, and I shall keep my mouth shut.'

'I will try,' said Dr. Rowntree; 'but if I see him looking very miserable, I don't think I can keep quiet.'

'You won't see Michael looking miserable, I can tell you that. My time is up,' added Roger, looking at his watch. 'I must go back to my work.'

He left the house, with the thought just come into his mind, 'After all, I shall have to speak to him. I don't see how how I can stay in this shop any longer, after the treatment he has had.'

He turned into the office, but it was with difficulty that he succeeded in giving any attention to his work; for in his mind's eye he had the image of Michael, seated alone in his desolation in that wretched room, where the wretched scene of the morning had taken place. It seemed to Roger that the worst blow had befallen Michael which by any possibility could overtake him—which idea serves sweetly to illustrate his own extreme ignorance of life, and of the protean forms which calamity and misfortune can assume; also of the marvellously elastic nature of the human creature, and of that part of it, be it brain, or heart, or soul, or whatsoever it may in reality be, which suffers.

Roger Camm, repeating to himself the half-forgotten Greek of his quotation about the goddess Calamity, never dreamed for a moment but that she had stayed her course. Surely her feet had pressed with sufficient weight upon

the head which she had selected as her standpoint! Could his spiritual eye have pierced that veil, filmy, and yet dense, which envelops us as we move to and fro on this earth, and seen the guiding powers about Michael, he would have perceived still hovering amongst them a dark form with a woebegone countenance—her of the tender feet yet.

He returned to Dr. Rowntree's from his work, and, having no heart to amuse himself in any way outside, sat with a book, to which he gave but a divided attention, wondering the while whether Michael would go to Magdalen that night, or wait till the morrow; and wondering likewise whether she would be of any use to him in the crisis.

'Gilbert would be a better spec. for her now,' said Roger bitterly, within himself. 'Only, not to blacken him more than is absolutely necessary, he never had the faintest fancy for her. In fact, I don't believe he would take her with fifty thousand down.'

Towards ten o'clock Michael came in, greeted them both with great composure, took his accustomed chair, lighted his pipe, and made some few observations to them before they all went to bed. He made not the slightest allusion to what had taken place in the morning, and Roger did not choose or wish to break upon this reserve: the little doctor did not dare. He found, what he had never suspected before, that his adopted son had the power of holding him at arm's length, and while he could not but admire what seemed to him Michael's strength and self-possession, he was not quite happy at finding it thus, as it were, used against himself. This dry-eyed composure, this something indescribable in voice and glance, were, thought the doctor, magnificent,

but they did not invite to the sentimental reflections of which he was longing to disburden himself.

They separated at their usual hour, and no one complained the next morning of not having slept, though under Michael's eyes there were ominous purple rings which told of his having enjoyed something less than perfect repose.

Roger got a few words alone with him before breakfast.

'Michael, I want to speak to you. After what has happened, I don't see how I can stay on at the factories. I don't fancy being mixed up with those two, when you are my friend.'

Michael paused a moment. 'I understand what you mean,' said he. '*You* are loyal, Roger, at any rate. But there is no need for you to feel like that. It is entirely between him and me, and not another soul in the world, if you know what I mean. I know what you feel, and I believe I should feel the same in your place; but can you make a sacrifice for my sake?'

'I daresay I could, if I knew what it was.'

'It is, just to remain where you are. I don't want any one to notice it for me. I can notice things for myself—such things as I wish noticing.'

'Oh, that settles the matter, of course,' said Roger. 'I shall stay—unless they sack me.'

At that moment a note was brought to Michael. He opened and read it very quickly, and then tossed it across to Roger.

'Read it,' said he. 'You must see me through each stage of this, so that we need never have to mention it to each other again.'

Roger read it. It was from Gilbert, and the paper

on which it was written was stamped, 'Thorsgarth, Bradstane-upon-Tees.'

'There are two precious rascals together under the same roof,' was Roger's unspoken comment before he began to read.

But his face changed as he perused the lines. The note was short, but strong in its very baldness and simplicity ; as unlike Gilbert's ordinary soft politeness as the inflexible decisiveness of Michael in the same matter had been unlike his usual conduct.

Gilbert asked Michael for an interview. 'Though you have treated me like a dog,' he said, 'I will show you things so that they shall be right, if you will see me. I can make it straight, too, though you do not think so.' After a few more phrases of a similar kind, he concluded—'Do not be hasty in your reply. Think well before you refuse what I ask, for if you do, I shall never ask again. I can make it right, and the whole future of both of us may depend upon your answer.'

Roger read this twice over to himself, and looked at Michael, who had gone to his desk and was writing quickly. As soon as he had finished, he came again to Roger and handed him his letter, which ran—

'I have received your note, and decline to see you or hold any communication with you. Your possessions are, I believe, at the Red Gables. I shall not be there to-morrow, and you will be at liberty to fetch away what you choose of your belongings. After that you cannot be admitted there. MICHAEL LANGSTROTH.'

'Michael,' said Roger, holding both these documents in his hand, and speaking very earnestly, 'forgive me for even seeming to meddle in your affairs. Gilbert

has a meaning under that note of his. Won't you think twice before you send that answer to him ?'

'I did all the thinking about him that I shall ever give to him again, yesterday,' said Michael, trenchantly. 'Do you suppose I spent all yesterday shut up in that room without coming to some definite conclusions upon matters in general and in particular? That is the answer I mean him to have, and that is the answer I shall send him.'

Roger had been far more struck than he would have cared to confess, with Gilbert's appeal. He felt as if confessing it would impeach his loyalty to his friend, and he was all Michael's—heart and soul. But he was a man with a reasonable head too, and he could not thrust out the feeling, though he was angry with himself for having it, that Michael was unjust, even though the object of his injustice were so great a sinner as Gilbert. Yesterday, Roger had thought no punishment could be terrible enough for Gilbert and his 'sneaking ;' now the punishment was beginning, and he found himself almost ready to plead for mercy for the criminal.

'Michael,' he said, in a low voice, 'have you the right to do it ?'

'Yes, I have,' replied Michael, his face growing terribly hard and set again. 'Nothing that I do to him now can be wrong.'

Roger paused, looking at his friend. In his mind were the words, 'until seventy times seven,' but he had not the courage to utter them. In the abstract, and as a Christian precept and command, doubtless they were right, but Michael was his friend ; Michael had been so fearfully, so stupendously wronged and cheated, and by his own brother. Was he to plead Gilbert's cause to

Michael? The idea seemed monstrous. Make it right? What could make right or alter that which he had done, cunningly and secretly, against the brother who had trusted him? 'Put yourself in his place—in Michael's place,' said Roger to himself. 'Michael must be right. And yet—what a cursed thing to have reared its head between two brothers!'

'You will do what you—please' (he was going to have said, 'what you think right,' but he instinctively felt that that would not have been the true expression). 'I know I would give my right hand if it could be different.'

'I know you would, but it never can and never will,' said Michael, folding and sealing his letter; and within a quarter of an hour it was on its way to Thorsgarth.

'Are you going far to-day?' the doctor asked Michael at breakfast. He would have given a good deal if the young man would have professed himself unable to stir, and so would have given him an opening for sympathy and condolence. But the young man did nothing of the kind.

'Yes,' he answered at once; 'a good way. I shall not be back to lunch. I shall get that at the Brydges. Then I have to go on to Cotherstone, but I shall be back to dinner; and then,' he added, 'I must really try to get to Balder Hall. It is ages since I was there.'

CHAPTER X

THE PROCESS OF ANNEALING

SOON after breakfast they separated as was their wont. Roger and the doctor came and went as usual, but the November afternoon had grown to darkness before Michael returned, looking pale and fagged from his long ride and hard day's work. Taken as a whole, the patients in and around Bradstane were not a very profitable set. For one rich old lady like Miss Strangforth, said Dr. Rowntree, lingering on as a chronic invalid for years—always wanting attention, and always profoundly grateful for all that her physicians either did or failed to do for her, and paying her bills with a cheque by return of post—for one treasure like this there were a dozen farmers' wives and daughters, or sordid, unlovely poor in Bridge Street, calling upon the doctor with a frequency and persistency which they would never have dreamed of if they had possessed either the means or the intention of paying him. Others there were, cottagers, labourers, living at immense distances over bad roads, and expecting a great deal of attention in return for very small fees—anything but a profitable *clientèle*—and some of these Michael had been visiting to-day.

He came in, picked up a note which lay on the hall table waiting for him, which he looked for as if he ex-

pected it—his dark face lighted for a moment as he took it, for the handwriting was that of Magdalen Wynter—put his head in at the library door, remarking, ‘I’m wet through—change my things—down directly,’ and ran upstairs, shutting his bedroom door after him.

‘What a spirit!’ cried the doctor, enthusiastically. ‘What a spirit he has! He’ll get over it yet.’

‘Better than his brother will, I think,’ said Roger, half to himself; and then, gazing into the fire, he wondered what Gilbert was doing, and wished, as he had caught himself wishing more than once that day, that Michael could have seen his way to answer that note of Gilbert’s differently.

By and by the gong sounded. Roger and the doctor went into the dining-room. Michael was still upstairs. The soup had been served, and he came not.

‘Go to Mr. Langstroth’s door and say everything will be cold, and we are waiting for him,’ said Dr. Rowntree to the serving-maid, who did as she was told, and presently returned, speedily followed by Michael.

Roger gave a sharp glance at him, and thought he carried his head very high—higher than usual.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ he said, with an affected, jaunty air, not in the least like his usual manner. ‘I quite forgot how time was going on.’

He laughed as he spoke, and said he was ravenously hungry, but offended the doctor greatly by scarcely touching what was set before him.

‘What do you mean by saying you are ravenous, and then not eating anything?’ he asked, crossly.

Michael laughed a nervous, forced laugh, and replied—

‘Oh, I must have thought I was hungrier than I really

am. I can't eat anything now. These long rides take it out of a fellow in such a way.'

'Did you have lunch at the Brydges?'

'Yes. They have quite a lot of people staying there. That was one reason why I was so late. After lunch I went with Tom to the stables to see his new hunter. It is a beauty, too.'

Roger sat silent, misliking the unusual volubility of Michael's speech and excuses. Michael himself, in the meantime, had gone off on a new tack, and was describing his adventures at a farmhouse on the moors, and the extraordinary symptoms enumerated by the mistress of it as requiring his advice. Dr. Rowntree, pleased to see that Michael was what he called 'plucking up a bit,' did not notice anything forced or unnatural in his manner. Roger's forebodings grew every moment darker, and he was thankful when at last they rose from the table and went into the library. On their way thither, however, he happened to touch Michael's sleeve with his hand, and found that it was wet.

'Why, man!' exclaimed he, 'you said you were wet through, and you have got on the identical togs that you came in with. What an ass you are, Michael!' he added, gently. 'Go upstairs and change, right away, or you won't get to Balder Hall to-night.'

'I'm not going to Balder Hall—I think not,' said Michael, wearily, as he let Roger push him towards the stairs, up which he began slowly and aimlessly to climb.

'There's something wrong—something wrong—something wrong,' kept ringing through Roger's mind. 'And something more than I know of.'

Michael's room was over the study. Roger, listening intently, heard him go into it, move about for a moment,

and then all was quiet. He sat with a book in his hand, and waited till his suspense grew almost to agony. At last he could be quiet no longer. He went upstairs and knocked softly at Michael's door. There was no answer. When he had tried once or twice again, he opened the door and went in. The candle burned on the dressing-table. Michael was in a large old easy-chair by the bedside, his head sunk on his breast, his eyes closed, and an open letter drooping from his right hand.

'Still in those wet clothes,' muttered Roger. 'He'll kill himself.'

He went up to him, and touched him on the shoulder. Michael awoke with a start, and looked confusedly around him.

'Roger!' he said. 'I'm so sleepy. I don't know what's come over me.' He seemed to see the letter he held, and went on, in an absent way, 'Wasn't it rather too bad of her not to wait till she had seen me? So long—it's three years since I began to wait for her and work for her. But as soon as she heard the first whisper—well, I did write and tell her what I'd done, and said I would go up and see her to-night, you know—yes, to-night. But she never waited. She flung me off,' and he threw out his arms. 'She made haste to do it. She must have been glad to do it! There's something in her letter which says so. See!' He held it out to Roger. 'What a lot of disagreeable things you've had to do for me lately!' he went on. 'Good Lord! how tired I am! I never was so tired in my life. I can't imagine the reason of it.'

Roger, deferring for a moment his intention of making Michael go to bed, stopped to read the letter, which ran:—

‘MY DEAR MICHAEL,

‘I received your letter this morning, and I am sorry to say I cannot approve of what you have done. Even before I got it, I had been thinking for some time about our engagement, and wondering if it had ever been a wise one. During these three days that you have not been here, I have had ample time to consider the subject. Even if nothing further had happened, I should have written as I now do ; but I do not disguise from you that the manner in which you have yourself cut off every prospect of advancement strengthens my resolution. These things are best done promptly. It saves pain to all concerned.

‘As there is now evidently no prospect of our being married within any definite time, I wish our engagement to cease. I desire this both on your account and my own. In addition to the reasons already stated, I do not think it would be for your happiness to continue it, and I am quite sure it would not be for mine. I shall be glad of a line from you when convenient, to say that you consent to my proposal ; and with every wish for your happiness and prosperity, I remain,

‘Your sincere friend,

‘MAGDALEN WYNTER.’

‘There’s a specimen of elegant composition !’ exclaimed Michael, suddenly sitting upright, and laughing harshly. ‘It could not have been more proper if she had written it at school, and the head governess had corrected it. What a blessed thing it is when people know their own minds, and can command plain English in which to make them known ! Only it’s a pity that they should take three years to learn what they do want, or whom they don’t want.’ He gave a disagreeable little laugh at

his own plesantry, and then rose. 'If you'll go down, Roger, I will now change these things, and join you directly. But it's lucky I need not go to Balder Hall, for I feel more and more tired every minute.'

'Take off your things, by all means,' said Roger, gravely; 'but you must not come down. You must go to bed.'

'To bed!' exclaimed Michael, contemptuously. 'A man go to bed because he's had a long ride in the wet and cold, and finds rather a chilly letter to greet him on his return! I am not such an ass.'

But as he spoke, strength seemed to forsake his limbs; he could not stand any more, but sat down again in the chair by the bedside.

'Perhaps Askam is sitting with her now. I suppose they will be married,' he said, betraying in his sudden weakness what his secret fear had evidently been. 'Perhaps she will keep him straight. He needs it, and she has a spirit, though I know Gilbert and my father never thought so; and——'

Here he began to wander in his talk; was shivering and shaking with cold one moment, burning hot the next. The thorough drenching which he had got after leaving the Brydges and riding for miles in the teeth of the bitter wind and rain; the excited condition of his brain over Gilbert's treachery; the receipt of Magdalen's letter, with its icy, unyielding egoism, showing him that all these years her own advantage was what she had been thinking of, and that there was not a spark of love for him in her dull heart;—these things broke through even his magnificent health and strength. He could not shake off the physical chill any more than he could the mental prostration. An attack of a tedious, wearing

low fever reduced him to perfect physical weakness and docility; but far worse than the fever was the accompanying mental gloom, the result of the shock to the nervous system. The young man, shut up in his room, too weak in body to move and shake off his demon visitant, went through all the horrors of a complete nervous breakdown, and made intimate acquaintance with all its attendant crew of ghastly shades—those pallid ghosts which assemble and gibber and mouth at us when we have so imposed upon our hard-worked servants, nerves and brain, as to have rendered them for the time powerless to answer to our imperious demands. Exhausted, they sink down, and say to us, 'We can no more,' and then we are at the mercy of every shadow, every whisper, every vain imagining and thought of horror.

Michael Langstroth, with his superb constitution and youth and temperance to back him, and with the devoted nursing of two such friends as Roger and the doctor, was in the course of a few weeks restored to comparative strength. Gradually the shades and ghosts, the bats and owls that haunt the dark places of the human mind, retired before gathering physical strength. Things were gone that could never be restored—hopes, joys, faiths, enthusiasms; things which had once seemed all-important, appeared now almost too insignificant for notice. Under Roger's eyes was the process accomplished which in his blindness he had long ago wished for his friend. He was made into a man: going into the valley of the shadow a youth, for all his six and twenty years, his bone, and his muscle, and his brain; coming out of it alive, sane, whole, if weak, but stripped of every superfluous hope, confidence, or youthfulness.

It was November when he went to his room that night ; it was the very end of December when he came out of it, a hollow-eyed spectre enough. And it was a month later still when Dr. Rowntree carried him down to Hastings one day, returning himself the next, and leaving his adopted son there to recruit.

So ended Michael Langstroth's youth, as a tale that is told.

CHAPTER XI

OTHO'S LETTER-BAG

A NOVEMBER morning, five years later. The sky gray and brooding, the trees still and leafless. Everything outside betokened the drear season of the year, and even the trimly kept lawns of Thorsgarth could not give brightness to this mood of Nature and the time o' day.

Within, in a small room which he generally used for breakfasting, Otho Askam stood on the hearthrug, with his burly back turned towards a large fire. A letter was in his hand, to which he seemed to pay more attention than it was usually his habit to give to his correspondence, for he turned it about, and perused it often. What are the changes which five years may have wrought in his traits, or how many of them have become strengthened and accentuated during that time?

He would seem, outwardly considered, to have gained something, both in breadth and solidity, without having in any way weakened or deteriorated. The lines were as sturdy, as burly as before. The expression of his countenance was distinctly imperious, even more imperious than of yore. As he stood there, the letter in one hand, the other impatiently smoothing the hair on his upper lip—a dark line only, which seemed to accentuate the sullenness of his face, without hiding or

softening a single harsh trait or feature—as he stood there his countenance was a dangerous-looking one ; the expression or atmosphere which radiated from the man was not that of sincerity. In repose he had the old fierceness of appearance—whatever mental or moral change might have taken place, that old look remained ; and when he raised his dark eyes and lifted his head, there was the same breathless, hunted, or hunting look about him, as in the days of his very young manhood there had been.

He was alone, and had just finished breakfast. At his feet sat a dignified Dandie Dinmont, somewhat advanced in years, and with the self-conscious aspect of a dog which has long been made much of by human beings, so that at last it has come to feel convinced that all their actions, words, and movements have some reference to it and its doings. It gazed up into Otho's face and watched his gestures, and when he spoke to it, it seemed pleased. Animals, even if they have that keen discernment as to the virtue or vice of the beings by whom they are surrounded, with which some persons credit them, can conceal their likes and dislikes, for their own purposes, quite as cleverly as the men and women they live with—at least, sophisticated and humanised dogs, like this highly educated Pouncer, can.

Looking out of the window, one saw the drear season of the year plainly written upon the outward aspect of things. November, sad November, but the November of the country, and not of the town. In southern places, and more favoured spots, trees might still be covered with fiery autumn tints ; but here every leaf had dropped, and upon the black and sodden-looking boughs and twigs hung a damp, clammy dew, and the grass

was hoar and gray with the same. The sky was leaden ; not a branch stirred. From here one could see where the ground sloped towards the river, but one could not see the stream itself. The room was warm ; the house was quiet ; the master was vexed—so much was plainly to be read on his face. And so much was audible from his lips too, as he ejaculated in a wrathful tone—

‘Beastly folly—and a beastly nuisance, too!’

And the cause of his vexation, the letter he held in his hand ? It is easy to read over his shoulder, and follow the lines, as he peruses it a third time, with the result, apparently, of increasing his first exasperation.

‘BRINSWELL, L——

‘DEAR OTHO,

‘It is a very long time since you wrote to me, —longer than usual. As for your ever coming to see me, I have long ago given up that expectation as a wild delusion. Are you “busy” ? Country gentlemen usually are, from what I hear ; and from what I’ve seen I should say they work very hard to make believe they have more to do than they know how to manage.

‘I wonder if you have realised that I was twenty-two on my last birthday ? I don’t suppose you have ever given a thought to the subject. At least, I missed your usual kind remembrance of me, on the occasion.’
[‘What the dickens does she mean ? I’ve never been in the habit of sending her birthday presents !’]

‘Well, it is of no use wasting words over things. I wish to explain my situation and intentions to you. Since Aunt Emily’s death, six months ago, Uncle Robert has been quite broken up, and he doesn’t seem to get any better. It is a fearful loss to him. No one knew

—of the world at large, I mean—how much they were bound up in each other, and how fearfully he misses her. After trying everything in the way of staying at home and keeping quiet, the doctors have advised a long voyage and a complete change. It has been decided to close Brinswell for a year at least, and he and Paul will set out on their travels in a week or two. I think they will visit Australia first, as they seem to think the long voyage will do him good, and they talk about India and America before they return—medicine for a troubled mind. Poor Uncle Robert! He agrees to all, and says he knows he is morbid. It seems to be thought very morbid nowadays if you have a grief that's past the healing for six months, even though it be your dearest in the whole world that has gone from you.

‘I am not going with Uncle Robert and Paul. If it had been a shorter journey, I might have done so. I should have liked immensely to go to America, for instance. But this is different. Paul, of course, goes with him, because it would be outrageous to think of his going alone; but the doctor, and Paul too, say he should not be surrounded by too many of his own family, as the object is entire change. They both think it better for me not to go; and I shall do as they think fit. It is very sad every way.

‘Very sad, it is—so sad that I feel myself a little heartless, because I can't help being rather glad that I shall leave here, and at last make acquaintance with my own home and my own brother. You do not know how often I have wished to do so. I am glad I shall see my birthplace and my north-country home; very glad I shall see you. And will not you say you will be glad to see me, dear Otho? It is years since I have seen you, and

it seems unnatural that it should be so. Will you come down and fetch me, or are you too busy? I propose to leave here a week from to-day. Let me know about it.

‘There is one other thing that I feel I must mention to you, which makes me very glad to be leaving here. About six months ago, Mr. Mowbray—you know, he is the rector of the next parish; the Hon. and Rev. Percy Mowbray—proposed to me. Poor Aunt Emily was very anxious for me to marry him, but it was a sheer, utter impossibility. Poor Aunt E——! Mr. Mowbray is rich, I believe, and of very good family, but I have never liked him, and I could not think of it for a moment. It was very painful to me to find how annoyed she was with me, even to the last. And of course Mr. Mowbray ceased to visit here, though I had to meet him sometimes. Altogether, it will be a great relief to me in every way, to get to Bradstane for a time. Now you are acquainted with all my reasons for wishing to come to you, and with my plans too, for the present. Send me a line soon, and believe me,

‘Your affectionate sister,

‘ELEANOR ASKAM.’

Otho flung the letter upon the table with temper.

‘Why the d—l could not she marry the fellow?’ he muttered angrily, looking darkly at Pouncer, who slightly moved his tail and elevated his ears with a sigh, as if he too wondered why—why she could not have married the fellow.

‘What could she wish for more? A girl in her position ought to take the first opportunity that offers—good, of course—of settling herself in life. And I’m sure old Aunt Emily knew what she was about. No one keener

on family and money in the world. If she wanted the match so badly, I'll go bail it was a good one. Of course she must marry—girls like her always must marry—and of course she can't go and marry a nobody. What a fool she must be! One would think she was not all there. Not that I should think the parson and I should have hit it off very well as brothers-in-law.' He gave a short laugh. 'A thundering mistake, that will,' he went on within himself. 'Such wills have no business to be made.'

This reflection referred to a clause in his father's will, providing that Otho's sister, so long as he and she both remained unmarried, was entitled to a home at Thorsgarth whenever she chose to inhabit it. In the event of his marriage, there remained for her the Dower House, which indeed was hers for her life if she did not marry—an old stone house in the square, not far from the Red Gables.

'I can't stop it, I suppose. It is a beastly nuisance, if ever there was one. As for going to fetch her, I shall do no such thing. Go nearly three hundred miles to fetch back some one I don't want? Not I! . . . And what can I do with her when I get her here? Good Lord! why must women be so stupid? Such sentimental nonsense! Because I am her brother—bah! There's that whey-faced Paul Stanley, her cousin, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth—she's known him all her life, and he has been far more of a brother to her than I have.'

Otho felt vindictive, realising what a grievous thing it was that he should have to be anybody's brother.

'The goings on in this house won't suit her at all,' he reflected, getting more and more savage the longer he thought about it. 'It has been a bachelor's house all

these years, and it has come to something if I'm to turn everything topsy-turvy for a chit of a girl like that. Dogs and horses and men, and tobacco and wine and cards—what will she do amidst it all? And what shall I do with her?'

He stopped muttering from sheer blankness of mind on the subject, still fiercely stroking his upper lip, till after a time a look of relief, though of very ill-tempered relief at the best, came over his face, as he thought—

'I suppose I must go and tell Magdalen about it. She'll be able to suggest something. I'll go this morning, before I answer this confounded letter. Whew—w—w!'

He blew out a kind of ill-tempered sigh, and Pouncer wagged his tail in visible and exceeding satisfaction.

Then Otho picked up another letter—short and, as it would seem, sweet, to him at least, for his countenance relaxed visibly.

'That's well. It will be rather a relief to have him here if she comes. He knows what is the right thing to do when there are petticoats on the premises. I don't.'

Then he rang the bell, ordered the breakfast-things to be taken away, and said he wanted his horse at eleven.

* * * * *

Soon after twelve Otho rode up to Balder Hall, was admitted to Miss Wynter's boudoir, and proceeded to unfold his troubles to her.

She had received him with the tranquillity which had always been the chief characteristic of her demeanour, and which seemed neither to have increased nor diminished with years; heard all that he had to say; and finally, when he pulled Eleanor's letter out of his pocket, and said, 'See for yourself what she says,' Magdalen

took the letter, opened it deliberately, and as deliberately read it. She had never heard much about Otho's sister; she was not a woman to talk to men about their feminine relatives, and Otho had always been glad to ignore his sister's existence as much as possible. This suddenly announced coming of Miss Askam took Magdalen by surprise. She had no time to decide whether it would best suit her views that they should be friends or enemies, but the letter would possibly give her a valuable glimpse into the writer's mind, perhaps even into her character, written as it was confidentially to an only brother. As to the question whether it was honourable or not to read such a letter, Miss Wynter was exactly the woman to say, if any one had raised such a scruple, 'Why, Otho gave it me!' Go to! she might have been credited with saying—the keeping one's own integrity is enough work for any person, without telling others when they appear to be losing theirs.

'Ah,' said she, when she had finished the letter, 'it is quite obvious why she wants to come. I did not know your sister was twenty-two, Otho. Indeed, I hardly realised that you had a sister.'

'No more did I, till she went and did this,' said Otho, resentfully.

'And you would rather she did not come?'

'Much rather. But it's no use thinking of keeping her away. I'm not going to try. She has got the right to come, by my father's will, and to stay as long as she likes, till one of us gets married. I can't prevent it. The thing is, I don't know what to do with her when I get her here.'

'Well, if you make it very pleasant for her, of course she'll want to stay.'

Otho nodded. 'Of course.'

'And if you upset all your habits, and make great changes on her account, then she will think you want her to stay, which would be quite a false impression.'

'I never thought of that.'

'Of course not; only it seems such a very obvious thing. Perhaps that is why it never occurred to you.'

'Now, come, none of your chaff. What I thought of was, that it's simply impossible for a girl like that to settle down in a house full of my ways. I must do something, and what to do I don't know. I wanted your advice.'

'And pray what right have you to my advice? Why should I interfere between you and your sister? I might tell you it is a just retribution on you for having alienated yourself systematically from all such ties. You demand my advice as if you were a highwayman requiring my watch and purse.'

Otho fidgeted and fumbled, h'mmed and ha'd.

'I beg your pardon, Magdalen. I thought I had the right—of having asked before, and received—advice, you know. And you know I always do come to you when I am in trouble.'

'Oh yes; I know you do.'

'Would you please tell me what I had better do?'

'Is she good-looking?' asked Magdalen.

'Oh no!' said Otho, promptly. 'She has red hair and freckles.'

Magdalen glanced at Otho's own dark traits, and said, 'Now, Otho!'

'Upon my soul and honour she has; and one of those faces that flush up all over, without a minute's warning. I never could see the sense of those faces. She goes

into raptures, you know, and cries and laughs about things—at least, she did when I saw her. In fact, though she's been at college somewhere, and is a complete blue—reads Homer, and all such bosh—I thought her a regular baby. She's got rather a dashing figure,' he added, musingly, 'but I swear to you, Magdalen, she is *not* good-looking.'

'But why, then, does this clergyman want to marry her? A man of wealth, family, and position? I know quite well who he is. They are very first-rate people down there.'

'Bah! She has twelve hundred a year of her own, to do what she likes with. Whoever heard of a parson, rich or poor, that could rise above such a thing as that?' said Otho, with brutality. 'And then, all places are not like Bradstane. They may like blues and freckles down there. . . . As for his being a man of wealth, family, and position, you might say that of me;' and he laughed cynically. 'She's as good as he is, any day.'

'Yes,' said Magdalen, gently. 'She is your sister.' She took up her work. 'It seems to me that you are making a great fuss about nothing. Why make any difference at all for her? Thorsgarth is your house, not hers, though she has the right to live there, under present circumstances. It is large enough in all conscience. Half a dozen families might live there, and hardly ever meet in the passages. Give her a sitting-room for herself, and tell her you are sorry that your business doesn't leave you time to see very much of her. It will not be long before she finds out what a dull place Bradstane is, and I do not think she will care to remain in it very long, especially with such a sympathetic brother.'

'You are a gem!' he said, admiringly.

'And bring her up to see me as soon as you can, after she comes.'

'The next afternoon, if it's fine,' he said, eagerly.

'Yes, the next afternoon, if you like. It will make no difference to me.'

Then, as if she had had enough of the subject, she returned the letter to him, and asked, 'Is there no meet to-day?'

'No. We got word last night that there wouldn't be. I'm going down to Bradstane just now, to the works. By the way, I had a letter from Gilbert, too, this morning. He's coming down for Christmas, as usual.'

'Oh, he never fails you.'

'No; he never does. I must take care not to bring him up here while his brother is on the premises. When does he come, now?'

'I know nothing about it. Sometimes at one hour, sometimes at another. And the surest way to bring about a collision is to take so much care to avoid one. As if there were not room for Gilbert and him in the house without dodging in that stupid way!'

'That's all very fine, but accidents will happen. Suppose they were to meet, after all, and have a shindy.'

'A shindy! Really, Otho, you exasperate me. In the first place, though you might, and probably would, make a shindy under such circumstances, you ought to know that they would never make one under any circumstances. And if they wished to, ever so, would they dare, before me?'

'Whew—w!' murmured Otho, under his breath; and then aloud—

'It seems as if all I said offended you this morning, Magdalen. However, I'll be more good-natured than you, and say thank you for your advice, which I shall follow. I must be off now.'

He got up and stood before her, holding out his hand. Magdalen surveyed him in the same cold, direct manner, as before. It was her old calm, almost expressionless gaze, but the eyes which had once been soft and velvety were now hard. She said good morning to him in a very indifferent way, and rang the bell. Otho left the room and went downstairs.

His inventive genius was apparently not great. He carried out her advice or instructions, whichever it might have been, almost to the letter. Without waiting to go to the works, he first of all called in at Thorsgarth, and while his horse waited, sat down and wrote a short letter to his sister, saying that he would meet her at the station if she would let him know by what train to expect her; that he was sorry to say he was quite too much engaged to travel down to the New Forest to bring her to Thorsgarth. He was afraid she would find Bradstane insufferably dull after the social life to which she had been accustomed. With regard to the parson, he added, with characteristic want of finish in his style, he thought it a pity that she had not seen her way to taking him, as the match seemed in every way a good one, but he could hear all about that when they met, and so he was her affectionate brother, OTHO ASKAM.

Then he rang the bell and desired to see the house-keeper; and when she arrived upon the scene, he gave his orders with the brevity and authority of a great general, and of course Mrs. Sparkes could not know that the said orders had originated with Magdalen Wynter.

It was decided that some south rooms—'the late Mrs. Askam's suite,' said Mrs. Sparkes—were to be prepared for Eleanor.

'Yes,' said Otho, with an uneasy feeling that, since he proposed to leave his sister considerably to her own society, it behoved him to look to her personal comfort as much as possible. 'And see that they are made nice—aired, you know, and to look—a—bright, and all that.'

'Oh, sir, the rooms will not need much doing to them. It's not my system to be taken by surprise,' said Mrs. Sparkes, with a lofty smile.

'Isn't it?' said Otho, with a kind of brusque facetiousness which had its effect in making him popular with some of his dependants. 'I wish I knew how you managed to avoid it. This affair—Miss Askam's coming, has taken me very much by surprise.'

'Oh, I didn't mean that exactly, sir,' said Mrs. Sparkes, pleased at the confidence reposed in her. 'There's some things can't be provided for, but *I* meant things in general.'

'Ah! well, you'll remember what I said,' remarked Otho; and Mrs. Sparkes bowed herself out.

Then he called for his horse again, and set off for his long-delayed visit to the Townend Mills. It need hardly be said that these calls were wholly perfunctory. Gilbert, from his London office, gave the orders, and Roger Camm in his Bradstane one carried them out. Otho had a pleasure in calling and looking round now and then, because he knew how Michael and Sir Thomas Winthrop hated the Bradstane Jute Co., Limited, and that Roger Camm hated him, Otho, the man who had found the money for it. The conclusion to which he

had come by the time that he halted in the mill-yard was that, having settled all things, he had now just one week of liberty before him, and, putting his sister from his mind, he resolved to think no more about her until her arrival should force him to do so.

CHAPTER XII

ELEANOR

OTHO'S week of freedom was over. His sister had come, and on the day following her arrival, in the afternoon, she rode with him through Bradstane town towards Balder Hall.

Any one who could have seen her, even in the gray and mournful November light, would have seen a very beautiful young woman. She was tall, and had an admirable figure, full of grace and strength. No feeble development here, nor niggard traits, nor look of feeble spine or over-sensitive nerves. Whatever the intellect within that beautiful head, its outward case was not one to find fault with. Her features were not very regular; harmonious, though, in their very irregularity. A soft, ivory-white complexion, as healthy as many a ruddy one; and with this complexion, the red-brown hair and lambent, tawny eyes which sometimes accompany it. Her eyebrows were much darker than either her hair or her eyes; and she had a large mouth, but a beautiful one—beautiful because of its smile in mirth and of its expression in repose.

There was a vague, indefinite family likeness between her and the fierce-looking Otho. Where it lay, in what exactly it consisted, it would have been impossible to

say, but it was there, though it was slight, and perhaps more easily to be detected when they were apart than when they were together; that is, seeing one of them alone, an observer might have thought, 'How like her brother' or 'his sister!' And yet, had the other one appeared, and the faces been compared, none could have discerned any resemblance.

During the first part of their ride they were both somewhat silent. She was looking about her with quick, keen glances, speaking an observant eye. Otho was wondering what Magdalen would say to him, what he could say to her, at a later time, when he, after his offhand description of the other day, had to introduce to her this beautiful creature now riding with him.

Eleanor, while making her observations on the town and the surroundings, was also occupied in thinking things over. It was a fact, she told herself with some mortification, that Otho and she were strangers to each other. It seemed that absence, and long separation, and the influence of utterly diverse lives and habits did produce that strangeness, even between brother and sister. Her Aunt Emily, in some of their talks, had told her that this would be the case, and she had said laughingly that she would defy her brother to be a stranger to her, or to make a stranger of her. She had felt very strong; she felt very strong now. That was her chief feeling, when she thought about herself at all—strength of soul and body, and a happy confidence that truth is great and will prevail.

Yet this had not been such a joyful home-coming as it ought to have been. In all confidence she had set out to find the home which she had only twice visited, each time for a day or two, on some tour with her guardians,

since, at six years of age, she had been brought away by her Aunt Emily, a motherless and fatherless child. Those visits had both been paid while she was still under fourteen, before Otho had left college and taken possession. Otho was six years her senior, and had pursued his public school course and got through his college career while she was yet in the schoolroom and in short frocks. Occasionally, when he had been in town, or anywhere near them, he had paid her a flying visit; had once, when they had been in the Highlands, spent a few days with them, to shoot grouse with his uncle and cousin Paul. On these occasions he had told her that she grew a fine girl (fancying it was a nice kind of thing to say to a sister, though when he said "fine" he meant "tall," and had taken so little real notice of her, that he had spoken in all good faith when describing her to Magdalen the week before). And he had uniformly discouraged the idea of her coming to live at Thorsgarth (it had never been seriously broached before), saying, whenever allusion had been made to such a thing, 'Oh, you will never want a home there. You will be married before that.'

But Eleanor had not married, and she had come to Thorsgarth to make her home there.

'Is this all the town there is, Otho?' she asked, suddenly, as they emerged from the street into the open road. 'I've almost forgotten it. What an odd, little, gray, weather-beaten place it is! Not a bit like the south.'

'Of course not.'

'I feel as if I'd never been here, and I hardly ever meet any one who has. It looks bleak here; that's what I mean.'

‘Well, it is,’ said Otho, vexed with such a persistent talk about the looks of a place. As if it mattered what Bradstane looked like! ‘And it’s November, too. You can’t expect roses in November.’

‘But I’ve always had them. There were Dijon roses growing over the south walls at Brinswell when I left. You remember Brinswell, Otho?’

‘Yes, I do; and a dull hole it was.’

‘Not any duller than Thorsgarth, I should fancy. It was as lovely a place as ever I saw. We were more there and less in London the last few years. Of course I like London, but I never felt dull at Brinswell. What fruit and flowers! Of course, things can’t grow here as they did there. The trees look so small and stunted.’

‘Small! Why, the Bradstane ash-trees are noted all through the country-side.’

‘Well, yes, the ash-trees. They are fine. But, of course, they ought to be.’ And she hummed to herself—

‘Oh, the oak, and the ash, and the bonny ivy-tree,
They grow the best at home in the north countrie.’

‘At home,’ she added, half to herself. ‘This is the north countrie, and this is my home, after all. It’s a shame I don’t know it better. Wherever you look,’ she added, addressing him directly again, ‘you seem to see a blue wall in the distance. Otho, does any one ever get as far as those blue walls?’ And she pointed towards the north-west, where Mickle Fell and his brethren loomed high.

‘Blue walls!’ repeated Otho, embarrassed by the application of such terms to the moors, which to him represented so many acres of good shooting, and those in another direction stabling for another hobby of his, of

which Eleanor was as yet unaware. 'How you talk! Those that you are pointing to are the fells on the Westmoreland border, and those other ones, to the south, are the Swaledale moors.'

'Swaledale moors? But one can get over them, I suppose. What is there on the other side?'

'More moors and more dales. It's bleak enough there, if you like. There's some good shooting, though.'

'I should like to see what there is at the other side,' said Eleanor, her eyes fixed dreamily on the moors. Then, as they turned a bend in the road, 'Is it far to this place you are taking me to?'

'Only about another three-quarters of a mile.'

'This Miss Wynter—is she a very old friend of yours?' asked Eleanor unconsciously. 'I don't ever remember to have heard you speak of her.'

'Oh yes, you have,' said Otho, with effrontery; 'but you've very likely forgotten. She is my only friend—amongst the women, that is.'

'Ah! an elderly woman?'

'About my own—well, she's a year or so older than I am.'

'Oh! An invalid, I suppose?'

'Why the—— What on earth makes you think she should be an invalid?'

'If she is neither old nor ill, I can't understand why I am being taken to see her. What should prevent her from coming to call upon me, in the usual order of things?'

Otho was embarrassed, and annoyed too. This extremely simple question of Eleanor's showed him, in a sudden flash, that Magdalen's behaviour was not exactly courteous. Stealing a side glance at his sister, he realised

that when she came to meet Magdalen, she might consider the latter had been insolent in her pretensions. Eleanor, to use his own phrase, knew what was what, every bit as well as Magdalen did. Free and natural though her manner was, he had known enough of his Aunt Emily to be aware that no one brought up by her could remain in ignorance as to any social usages. In his haste to bring Magdalen's influence into the field, he had made a mistake, and she probably did not care whether Eleanor were offended or no. All he could say to get himself out of his difficulty was—

‘We’re a neighbourly lot here, when we do happen to be friends. You’ll be disappointed if you expect to find London etiquette at Bradstane.’

‘I daresay,’ said she, with a light laugh. ‘I’ve generally found country etiquette far more burdensome than etiquette in London. That was partly what made me wonder. However, people do get a little rusty in their manners, I daresay, when they live in one small set,’ Eleanor concluded serenely ; but there was a sparkle in her eye as she spoke. Her curiosity as to this Miss Wynter was aroused.

Otho burst into a short laugh, as he heard this speech, thinking within himself, ‘I’ll keep that for Magdalen, and treat her to it when she’s pulling me up, some day. Upon my word, this girl is enough to make most others look rusty.’

‘Miss Wynter is your only friend among the women, you say,’ pursued Eleanor in flute-like tones. ‘How is that? Don’t you like the ladies about here?’

Otho’s expression of countenance, on hearing this question, was worthy of study. Eleanor saw it, and averted her face. She had already accurately gauged

one phase of Otho's character. He was inwardly perturbed just now. His troubles were beginning already. Here was this girl evidently under the impression that he was hand-in-glove with all the ordinary society of the place. How was he to explain to her exactly how things stood between him and Magdalen Wynter? He knew he could not, in any way that should seem plausible to one brought up like her. He was bored at having to explain at all, and in his vexation took refuge in some sweeping general statements.

'Like the ladies about here? No, I don't. And that is one reason why I knew you would be awfully dull if you came here. You see, it has suited my tastes not to go much into the society here—in fact, hardly at all; and they have just begun to understand it at last, and to let me alone—give over inviting me, and all that. So you won't find it very lively. But Magdalen is different. I've known her ever since I came here. We were thick at the very first, and have stuck together ever since, because she's so reasonable and sensible. As for the others'—he spoke with solemnity—'they are one half sharks and the other half fools. There's no such thing as meeting a girl, and trying to have a friendship with her, before you go any farther. Your sex, my dear, are incapable of friendship with a man. Either they try to make him in love with them, and make his existence miserable, or they fall in love with him themselves—or think they do; it's much of a muchness—and if he don't respond they say he has deceived them, or trifled with them, or something equally absurd. Suppose you see a nice girl, or a girl that you think looks nice. Well, you have a head on your shoulders, and you know she may be a shrew, for all her pleasantness, just as a

horse may be a screw, though he looks all right. You think it worth while to try and know her a bit better, before you risk anything. You can't do it. You may not do it. It is their one object to get you to marry them without giving you any opportunity to know anything about them. You never get to know their real thoughts about any one thing on earth. You must run the gauntlet of their mothers and sisters to get even a word with them. It isn't fair; it's deuced hard. Why are you to show up everything, and be slanged if you don't do it all on the square, while they are not to have any questions asked at all? The sisters are bad enough, especially if you are sweet on a younger one, but the mothers—oh, Lord! Those mothers! If you do but look at one of their precious girls, they are down upon you to know your "intentions." I say, a man has a right to ask questions in his turn—if their tempers are all right, if they're sound in wind and limb, and so on. I bolt if I see one of those mothers within——'

He was interrupted by a peal of laughter. Eleanor had contained herself as long as she could, but at each higher flight of Otho's sombre eloquence it had been more and more difficult to keep her gravity. Now it was impossible. She gave free vent to her mirth, and bent to her saddle-bow in her merriment.

'Oh, Otho!' she ejaculated at last, turning a face quivering with laughter to him, and eyes dancing behind tears of amusement. He looked at her in speechless astonishment, and then by degrees managed to take in the fact that she was laughing at him—at his solemn and withering denunciation of the man-traps set for the unwary in social life. He did not remember such a

thing to have happened to him before, and he was stunned by the shock.

‘Poor dear Otho!’ she said, between new bursts of merriment. ‘What a life you must have led, with all these women trying to entrap you! No wonder you are reserved and sad! No wonder you have retired into private life to avoid the dangers that beset you on all sides! I wonder almost that you dare ride out alone. And yet, Otho, what a great thing to be so sought after!’

Otho’s face was almost purple, partly with breathless amazement, partly with anger. Eleanor, it seemed, did not realise, or did not care, to what inconvenience he was put by her presence here at all. She chaffed and laughed at him. She now put the crowning point to this offensive conduct by leaning over towards him, and asking, with a pretence of looking round to see that no one was near to look or listen—

‘Otho, did Miss Wynter warn you of the danger of these harpies by whom you are surrounded? Women are always quick to see through the designs of other women. How good of her to take care of you and keep you out of danger!’

Otho’s deep colour grew deeper still. Shrewdly had Eleanor hit the mark. The language, the turns of expression, were his own, native to his genius and redolent of his mind; but the substance of his speech was the substance of scores of conversations with Magdalen, in which she had amused him by tearing to pieces the supposed designs of their neighbours of the whole countryside.

‘What bosh!’ he said at last, with sovereign contempt. ‘You’ll be saying next that she had designs herself.’ A peculiar smile hovered about his sister’s lips, but she

said nothing. 'No, no. It is quite different with her, as you will see when you meet her. You can go and have an hour's chat with her—or two hours, if you like. She's always pleasant, always amusing; no father or mother to be down on you. And she does not imagine, even if you were to go and see her regularly twice a week, that you've got "intentions;" and, what is more, she has none herself. She can be pleasant, and free, and agreeable, without all the time being bent upon hooking you. Yes'—the taciturn Otho waxed enthusiastic—'she is my friend. I don't care who knows it. She's the only woman in the neighbourhood that I call upon.'

Had Eleanor been better acquainted with 'the neighbourhood' and its annals, she might better have appreciated the honourable distinction conveyed in this speech.

'Dear me! She ought to be flattered, I am sure. Is this place of hers a large one?'

'Balder Hall, Magdalen's? God bless you, no! I wish it was. She's a poor penniless niece of an old bed-ridden woman, Miss Martha Strangforth, whom they call about here "the Immortal," for they say she will never die. I daresay Magdalen wishes it were true, for so long as the old woman lives the girl has a home and a position. And old Martha's income dies with her, and I don't fancy she has saved much.'

'Girl—she must be a precocious girl,' said Eleanor, sweetly.

'Oh, the malice of you women!' said Otho, gnashing his teeth with virtuous and masculine indignation. 'When I say "girl," I'm rather stretching a point. She is a year or so older than I am—about eight and twenty.'

And it seems to me that precious few women under that age are worth speaking to.'

'Well, they certainly should be worth speaking to by the time they are that age, if ever they intend to be. But if she is poor and dependent, it seems to me men ought to be rather careful about going to see her very often.'

'For fear she should set traps for them, of course,' sneered Otho.

'Oh, not at all. But because other people are sometimes ill-natured, and a woman who has her way to make, or who may have her living to earn some time, cannot be too careful.'

'Oh, come, Eleanor! When you see her you will understand that one can't speak of Magdalen Wynter in that way. No one could imagine her in any inferior position. It isn't in her to take one.'

'Isn't it? Well, it is lucky for her if she has some power that can defy need and want of money. I used to help Aunt Emily with some charitable works that she was interested in—governesses' homes, and ladies' work societies, and so on; and you would have been astonished at the terrible cases one used to see, and the deplorable condition of ladies—ladies of birth and beauty, with the most terrible tales of the straits to which poverty and distress had driven them. I used to lie awake for hours sometimes, wishing I had the courage to divide my money into a common fund, for some of the poorest, and go and live with them on equal terms.'

'You'll come to no good if you let that sort of nonsense get into your head,' said Otho, gruffly. 'But it's useless to talk. You will understand what I mean when

you see her,' he added, feeling that his sister was not altogether devoid of the obstinacy which was so salient a feature in his own character. 'She does not care for the people about here, you know. In fact, she dislikes them, and makes great fun of them. And they don't care about her; she's too handsome for them.'

Eleanor made no answer to this, and they rode on in silence for a little time. Miss Askam did not feel 'drawn' to Magdalen by Otho's description of his friend. Indeed, it had the very natural effect of putting her mind into a defensive attitude with regard to the other woman. Without being any stickler for forms, she could not understand why Miss Wynter had not called upon her, perhaps on her aunt's behalf, or why she was being thus hurried to see this wonderful penniless orphan who had no designs upon men, but who disliked and was disliked by all the other women of the neighbourhood. 'It looks very much as if I were being taken to her on approval, for inspection,' said Eleanor within herself. Her white teeth showed a little in a not altogether amiable smile. 'Well, let it be so. I am committed to nothing with her. We will see what she is. I think I can sustain her inspection.'

She also reflected that Otho's gift of character-drawing seemed to be in a very undeveloped condition, and she had more than once noticed, during her short career, that when men describe women, they very often paint them, not as they are, but as the women have chosen that they should find them; and this was very likely the case with Otho and Miss Wynter.

'Here we are,' observed Otho, as they turned in at the Balder Hall Lodge, rode up to the door, and found that Miss Wynter was at home.

CHAPTER XIII

TWENTY-EIGHT AND TWENTY-TWO

MISS STRANGFORTH'S butler threw open the door of an exquisite little upstairs sitting-room, and announced Otho and Eleanor. The latter, whose whole mind had been dwelling in anticipation on the meeting with this woman whom she disliked in advance, got a sort of jar through her nerves as, on walking into the room, she confronted, not only Magdalen luxuriously stretched in a low easy-chair by the fire, but, much more conspicuous at the moment, the figure of a man, standing on the hearth-rug, with his back to the fire. A slight shock went through her as she encountered the pair of grave and searching eyes which had been present in her mind more than once during the last twenty-four hours. It was Michael Langstroth who looked at her. Eleanor's first feeling was an unreasoning one of disappointment. 'He comes to see her too, then.' The next was one of satisfaction. 'At any rate, I shall now learn who he is.'

Then her attention was drawn to Magdalen, as the latter rose, with a slight 'Ah!' and advanced, saying, 'Well, Otho, how do you do?'

Eleanor looked at her. She had a rapid general impression of a tall woman, beautiful both in face and form, and arrayed in a mouse-coloured velvet gown—a

woman whose exceedingly white and finely-shaped hands held some brilliant scarlet wool and ivory knitting-needles ; who had eyes which for darkness and coldness could not be surpassed, and a sweet and frigid smile.

‘Well,’ Otho retorted, not very gaily ; ‘I’ve smashed through all etiquette and ceremony, I suppose, in doing this, and brought my sister to see you, instead of waiting for you to come and see her. Eleanor, this is my friend, Miss Wynter.’

He led his sister a little forward as he spoke, so that she was fully displayed to Magdalen’s view ; and Miss Wynter’s eyes encountered a sight she did not often see—a woman as beautiful as herself, and possessing, too, the powerful advantage of being six years younger than she was. Her plain dark riding dress suited to admiration the frank and hardy youthfulness of the wearer ; for with all her softness of voice and outline, and for all the rounded grace of her form, there was a hardness about Eleanor Askam which gave piquancy to her whole aspect.

‘It was very good of you, Otho, and exceedingly good of you, Miss Askam. I was absolutely unable to go out this afternoon, and I wanted so much to make your acquaintance.’ She extended her hand to Eleanor, and smiled her usual smile ; one without any flavour of insincerity, or of sincerity either—a smile which repelled and displeased Eleanor, she knew not why.

‘Otho seemed extremely anxious about it,’ she said, coolly and gravely, ‘and I did what he wished me to do.’

Her voice rang out, clear and distinct—no muffled notes, and no hesitation or pretence of being delighted to pay the visit. Magdalen noted it all, and replied sweetly—

‘Yes ; I am so glad you came. Take this easy-chair, and—— Oh, Michael, I beg your pardon.’ She slurred over an almost inaudible introduction.

‘Miss Askam and I have met already,’ said Michael with composure. ‘I think I may safely claim the honour of having been before you in having made her acquaintance.’

‘No—how?’ exclaimed Magdalen, arrested.

‘Yes,’ said Eleanor, looking at Michael as she seated herself. ‘I did not know who Mr.——’

‘Langstroth,’ said Michael, speaking for himself.

‘Langstroth,’ repeated Eleanor, with a little bow, ‘was ; nor he who I was.’

‘I beg your pardon. I read your name on the label that was on your bag,’ he remarked ; but he neither bowed nor smiled, though it would have been impossible to say that his manner was not polite. It was very much so, but not at all cordial.

‘Mr. Langstroth saved me from getting out a station too soon,’ she said, turning to Otho, in explanation. She could not help seeing that his moody countenance wore anything but one of its lighter expressions. He stood stiffly, his hat and whip in his hand, and a fleeting side-glance had shown her that he and the stranger (was he any relation, she wondered, to Otho’s great friend, Gilbert Langstroth, who was coming down for Christmas?) had exchanged a very slight and indifferent acknowledgment of each other’s presence.

Michael Langstroth, now standing upright, looking on, betrayed no feeling of any kind as he heard her remark. It was five years now since he had had a letter from Magdalen, which had gone near to turning his brain. Such episodes have the effect upon those who

receive them of, to use a vulgarism, killing or curing. Michael had been cured; hence his presence in Magdalen's boudoir now; hence his ability to stand by and take in the comedy of the situation, and to feel decidedly, if a little sardonically, amused at what was taking place.

He did not sit down again. He wished Magdalen good afternoon; and Eleanor noticed that, although polite—she had a strong conviction that under no possible combination of circumstances could he be impolite—he was not what could be called genial. He was grave and distant, and however slight this gravity and distance, they were present, and Eleanor, keenly sensitive to manner and expression, noticed them instantly. Michael said he would call again in a few days, bowed to them all, and took his departure.

‘Now, Otho,’ said Miss Wynter, almost before Michael had left the room, ‘I have something to tell you. I had better do it now, before I forget. Briggs has got a very wonderful colt to show you, and has been expressing the most ardent longing——’

‘Briggs—a colt!’ exclaimed Otho, with unaffected interest and animation; ‘I’ll go to him this minute. I suppose he is at the stables?’

‘I suppose so—somewhere there,’ replied Magdalen nonchalantly; and Otho disappeared instantly, while Eleanor sat still, feeling intensely displeased, less at what was actually said and done than at the tone and the manner of it. Fine-tempered and incapable of behaving with insolence or impertinence to any inferior, it yet seemed to her that Magdalen was scarcely in a position to order Otho to the stables, so that she might be left alone with his sister; or, indeed, to call him by his Christian name, and almost openly to hint that she

wanted him out of the way—unless, indeed, she were engaged to be married to him, which Eleanor, with a sudden sense of apprehension, hoped she was not; and recalling Otho's dissertations on their ride hither, she felt it was scarcely possible that he could be.

While she was thinking these thoughts, and while the shadow of them was on her too expressive countenance, Magdalen sank back in her chair, watching her visitor keenly, if unobtrusively. When she addressed her, she spoke with a smile, but her eyes, Eleanor noticed, did not in the least partake of the smile upon her lips. She smiled, not because she felt pleased, or genial, or mirthful, but mechanically—because it is the custom to smile when you receive your guests.

Eleanor, on her part, was conscious of liking less and less the aroma, as it were, of Miss Wynter and her surroundings; but she was aware that this was blind prejudice, and was determined to overcome it if she could. She was very young, and Otho had not been wrong when he had described her as enthusiastic; but she felt a kind of mental and moral chill, or ever she had really entered into conversation with this woman, who had, as it were, been so suddenly flung across her path, and who, she began to realise, must be a powerful influence in Otho's life. It must be so, she reflected, or he would not thus have been eager to bring them together, and then as eager to leave them alone. Alone, for what?—to discover the innate and latent points of sympathy between them, and to rejoice in them, or to fight out their radical differences to the bitter end?

CHAPTER XIV

THRUST AND PARRY

‘OF course you are quite strange to Bradstane?’ began Magdalen.

‘Yes, quite—at least, practically so. I can’t recall much about it. In fact, I’m strange to the north altogether, except Scotland—staying at hotels or shooting-boxes, you know.’

‘Ah, yes. Those are luxuries for the rich,’ said Magdalen, whose whole person, attire, and surroundings breathed an atmosphere of more than riches, of extravagance. ‘I may say I have never been in the south, for I haven’t, except to Bournemouth, with my aunt. Well, I wonder how you will “like,” as they say here. The society of Bradstane is a little peculiar. It is not intellectual’—Eleanor felt a little surprise at this; Magdalen herself had not struck her as looking intellectual—‘and it is not by any means lively. And I suppose you have been accustomed to a good deal of variety in your life?’

‘Not lately. Six months ago, my aunt, Mrs. Stanley, who has been my second mother, died very suddenly. We have had a very quiet and a very sad house ever since, and if Bradstane were ever so gay, I should not be going out much now.’

‘Ah, yes, very sad—Otho mentioned your loss,’ mur-

mured Magdalen, who, with the self-absorption of her kind, had forgotten Eleanor's account of her uncle's condition.

'And then,' added Eleanor, feeling her heart beating just a little faster, but marching straight into the fray, 'I have Otho. I hope to see something of him now. He is my only brother, and I have been much separated from him.'

'Ah, your brother,' said Magdalen, all at once discarding her purring tone, and taking up her knitting, with the expression of one who has just come to some mental decision. 'He was the attraction, was he?'

'Hateful woman!' said Eleanor within herself. 'She thinks he is her property, and that I am come to dispute him with her. So I have, and so I will.' Then aloud, 'Certainly, he was *an* attraction, if it needed a great attraction to make me wish to visit my own home, after so many years. Besides, who knows how long I may have the chance to be with him, and get to know him? I am astonished that he has not married before now.'

A slight pause. Eleanor herself was surprised to find in what style she was talking; but something in the very presence of the other woman seemed to arouse her pugnacity, and to place her in an almost aggressive attitude.

'At any rate, while I have the field to myself, I mean to let Otho know that he has a sister,' she pursued, with a slight laugh.

'Highly commendable,' said Magdalen, either with constraint or a slight sneer; it would have been difficult to say which.

'He is a great friend of yours, I find,' continued Eleanor, looking directly at Magdalen, who made no reply to the words. Eleanor paused a moment, and

then took her course. She was really anxious to learn, if she could, the extent of this woman's influence over her brother; but more than that, to get to know whether she were a sincere woman, or a false one. She would feign a tender interest in Otho's affairs, and a sisterly solicitude for his welfare. As a matter of fact, she knew nothing of the said affairs, nor whether well or ill might be the word to apply to his spiritual condition. She would try to discover. It was a hardy resolution, with such a woman as Magdalen for her opponent, but want of courage was not one of Eleanor's defects.

'It seems so strange,' she presently went on, in a musing tone, 'that you, living in the same place and being his friend, must have seen him often, and know him quite well, while I, his own sister, scarcely know anything about him.'

'You think that is a great loss, I suppose?'

'Well, yes, I do. I think I ought to know about him—good or bad. It seems to me unnatural that I should not. I wish you would tell me something about him, Miss Wynter. It really seems as though he had left us on purpose that we might discuss him.'

'Why discuss him at all?'

'Well,' said Eleanor with a smile, 'I don't think you and I can have many objects of mutual interest to talk about. Otho is one, obviously—my brother and your friend. I think it is most natural to talk about him. From what he said of you, I am sure you must know a great deal of his character and disposition. He is very reserved, I think. I want to get on with him, of course. Can't you tell me something of his tastes and habits?'

Miss Wynter's white eyelids drooped, but quivered

not. Her fingers flew in and out of the scarlet wool, and the ivory needles made a pleasant, dull clicking. What she thought with cold annoyance was, that Eleanor was impertinent and inquisitive, devoid of tact and *savoir faire*. (No one knew better than Eleanor herself that her present conduct was scarcely conventional, but she felt that she did not much care what it was, so long as she rode away from Balder Hall possessed of definite views as to Magdalen's goodness or badness, and she rather hoped the conversation would disclose badness.) If the young woman were put down at once and promptly, Magdalen argued, she might perhaps profit by the lesson; if not, if encouraged in the least, she was almost certain to become very troublesome. So she said—

‘My dear child, you surely do not suppose that because a man comes once or twice a week and chats with one for an hour or two, or even spends a whole afternoon in one’s society, that he necessarily reveals to one anything of his real habits or character?’

‘It depends on what his habits may be, of course,’ said Eleanor with gravity; and, in spite of telling herself that she was acting a part, she felt a vague uneasiness, which vexed her like a coming trouble whenever any question arose of Otho and his doings. It was not the first time she had felt it. Dim reports of his fastness and strange habits had penetrated even to her well-sheltered home with the Stanleys; and more than once her uncle had said to her, ‘My dear, I’m afraid your brother spends a good deal of money in a very reckless way.’

‘It depends on what his habits may be,’ she repeated; ‘but he could not come so often as that and not show something of his character—or disposition, perhaps I should say.’

‘Well, you will see him daily, now that you have come to live with him—possibly for many hours in each day. I see him, at the most, once or twice a week, for an hour, or perhaps two hours. It is obvious that your opportunities will be incomparably greater than mine have been. Don’t you think you had better study his character at first hand—if you are interested in it, that is?’

‘If I am interested—in my own brother?’

‘I see you have very enthusiastic ideas, and quite orthodox ones, about brothers and sisters loving each other, however dissimilar in character and disposition they may be’ (Eleanor repressed a smile. She had not expressed any such views), ‘just because they are brothers and sisters. But, you know, it is not wise to take your impressions of any one in whom you are interested from a third person. How can you know what feelings and what motives might influence me in speaking to you of him——’

‘Oh, Miss Wynter, would Otho have brought me here if you had had a bad influence over him? He thinks so much of you,’ said Eleanor, seeing that Magdalen had accepted her (Eleanor’s) presentation of herself, and feeling that her *rôle* was now an easy one to play.

‘No,’ pursued Miss Wynter, apparently unheeding Eleanor’s last remark; ‘study him and his character at your ease, by yourself, and don’t worry yourself about it. As for his habits—now, this advice really comes from my heart, Miss Askam,’ and Magdalen laid down her work and looked with cold earnestness at her companion—‘if he were younger than you, or in any way in your keeping or under your control, it would clearly be your duty to become acquainted with his incomings and

outgoings, and to supervise his proceedings. But just the reverse is the case. He is older than you by several years; he is his own master, and has been so for many years, accustomed to consult himself alone—you little know how much himself alone—in the management of his own affairs. He knows his own aims and wishes, if he has any. Let me advise you, if you wish to have a shadow of influence over him, never to interfere, by word, look, or deed, with anything that he may choose to do. I do not say that by this course you will gain an influence over him, but I say that if you do not observe it, you will lose every chance of ever gaining one. He will not brook the least appearance of meddling—'

'But, indeed, I do not want——' began Eleanor, astounded at the revelation her ruse had called forth—amazed at the depths of angry feeling which she saw quickly enough were surging under that composed exterior called Magdalen Wynter. But Magdalen had begun her exhortation, and was not to be easily stopped. In the same cold but energetic style she went on—

'If you once let him see that you think his affairs are anything to you, your chance is gone.'

'My chance—of what?' thought Eleanor, looking, as she now felt, very grave.

Magdalen saw this gravity. Her thought was, 'Silly, sentimental creature! The idea of coming rushing in with a mission or a vocation to improve her brother! Some women never will learn.' Then, after a moment's pause, she continued—

'Men are odd, you know. If they do wrong, yes, even if they wrong you—if they do something flagrantly unjust, and you reproach them, or scold them, or try to make them see how bad they have been, what good does

it do? It does not make them sorry or ashamed, but it makes them think you very disagreeable; it makes them angry with you for dictating to them; it makes them cease to have any wish to please you, or any regard for you. Let him alone, unless you wish to make mischief. You understand me, I daresay?’

‘I’m afraid I understand that my brother’s habits are not what they should be.’

‘That is a very hasty conclusion, and shows that you certainly have not understood me. If I must speak so very plainly——’

‘I do not wish to interfere with him,’ said Eleanor, with a shade of hauteur; but she was uneasy, and an anxious colour had begun to burn on either cheek. She had come hither against her will. She had disliked Magdalen from Otho’s talk of her, had disliked her more on seeing and conversing with her, and had descended to subterfuge, to find out her thoughts about her brother. She was pure of any wish to be a missionary to Otho, which was evidently what Magdalen had gathered to be her object; but she had unwittingly called forth an indirect characterisation of her brother—and that from one who evidently knew him well, and was tenacious of her hold on him—which roused her deepest uneasiness. After the last words there was a pause, and then Eleanor said slowly, and wishing the while that she had not begun the conversation—

‘And I have no doubt that you know far more about him than I do.’

‘You credit me with a great deal of very important knowledge,’ said Magdalen, coldly and sweetly. ‘All I can say is, that if I possessed that knowledge to the full, I should not think of imparting it to you—not for a moment.

And let me remind you that, whether he be good or bad, I am not your brother's keeper. I think he is quite competent to take care of himself.'

'I was not dreaming of assuming any such office,' Eleanor said, fully convinced from Magdalen's tone that she did feel herself to be Otho's keeper, in a sense; that she liked the proprietorship, and meant to fight for her possession of it, if it were disputed. The idea of entering the lists with her filled Eleanor with disgust. Her impressions, could she have reduced them to their simplest form, were that Otho was not what he ought to be in the matter of conduct, and that Magdalen knew a good deal more about him than she chose to tell. Miss Wynter, however, seemed to consider the subject at an end, and to assume that Eleanor had found out her mistake. She herself began with a new subject.

'How came you to know Michael Langstroth?' she inquired, with her sweetest smile.

'Oh, I don't consider that I know him. Did you not hear what I said to Otho? He got into the carriage I was in, at a station near Tebay. He seemed in a great hurry, and jumped in as the train was setting off——'

'Just like him!'

'A porter at Tebay had told me that the station after this one at which Mr. Langstroth got in would be Bradstane, so I was collecting my things, and I suppose he saw from that label on my bag where I was really going; for he said, "Are you getting out at Cotherstone?" Then, of course, I explained, and he explained, and it was all right. He got out at Cotherstone, and I came on to Bradstane.'

'Oh yes,' said Magdalen, who had listened attentively, and watched no less attentively the manner and gestures

of the speaker. 'He has such long distances to go in a country place like this.'

'Do they call him "Doctor" Langstroth here?'

'Yes, they all do. It is a country habit. He "doctors" them, so he is "the doctor;" but he practises as a surgeon.'

'Is he a friend of yours, then?'

'I have known him intimately for many years.'

'Otho says that some one whom he called "Gilbert Langstroth" is his greatest friend. Is he any relation of this Mr. Langstroth?'

'Brother.'

'Indeed! But Otho seemed not to know Dr. Langstroth very well.'

'They are not devoted to each other.'

'Have they quarrelled?'

It could hardly be that these questions of Eleanor's, put in all innocence and good faith, were agreeable to Magdalen. Perhaps, when she asked Otho to bring his sister soon, she had foreseen some such catechism. Perhaps she had reflected that the old facts of her engagement to Michael and its rupture, and the reasons assigned for it, must surely, sooner or later, come to Eleanor Askam's ears, since they were public property, and it was not the fashion in Bradstane to hide any treasure, however minute, of fact or fiction, gossip or scandal, which had once gained credence in the public mind. Why not, she may have reflected, let Eleanor hear the story from herself, and so at any rate gain that first hearing which is supposed to go such a long way towards deciding the final verdict? She knew quite well that, along with the simple account of her own engagement to Michael, and of its having been broken off, Eleanor

would likewise hear that she, Magdalen, had jilted Michael, hoping to be married by Otho Askam. That, whether true or not, was what was said, and Magdalen knew it as well as if she had heard it herself. She knew, too, that women had laughed at her, and did laugh at her yet, because she had thrown Michael over, they said, and not secured Otho. People did not say those things to her, of course, but she knew that they were said, and that they would be said to Eleanor. Grievous though the questions of the latter might appear to her, therefore, it might have been still more grievous to know that Eleanor was seated in other drawing-rooms, hearing other versions of the story.

‘Oh, it is a long tale, rather,’ said she ; and she related correctly enough the history of the two brothers, not mentioning her own relations to Michael, but watching Eleanor with interest. She saw how the girl’s eyes gradually kindled, and her lips parted, as she heard, and seemed almost to foresee the end of the tale. She leaned forward eagerly as Magdalen wound up with the story of the will and its directions, and how Michael had received the blow.

‘Yes?’ said Eleanor.

‘When he found that his father’s house was all that belonged to him, the first thing he did was to turn Gilbert out of it, calling him traitor, and saying he had lost his brother. He drove him out that instant, you know, on the spot.’

‘He was right,’ exclaimed Eleanor, in a deep voice, which showed how great had been her interest and her suspense ; and as she spoke, she struck her riding whip emphatically across her left hand, and looked up with a frown. ‘I would have done the same. Cowardly, snake-

like traitor!' The instinct of the fighting animal was strong in Eleanor, as it is in most healthy creatures.

'You think so? A great many other persons thought the same; and a great lawyer, a friend of Michael's, wanted him to dispute the will.'

'And did he?'

'Michael dispute it! My dear Miss Askam, he is far too haughty and high-flown to descend to any such mundane method of settling the matter. He said he washed his hands of it, and left his brother Gilbert to his conscience. He refused to touch any of the sum which was left him—or rather, to Gilbert, to manage for him. He said he had a profession which would keep him from starvation, and a roof to cover him—he would have no more.'

'I agree with him,' said Eleanor, still very emphatically; and she lifted her eyes, filled with the feeling that was in her, and her whole countenance brightened with an ennobling light, the result of inner exaltation, and as Magdalen met this gaze, her own eyes dilated, a look of something like affright crossed her face; she said quickly and coldly—

'It sounds very well—very grand, does it not? Quite heroic, in fact.'

'I think it was very fine—very high.'

'It sounds so, and it was so, in a way. But when one comes down to the dull regions of common sense, as one always has to do in the end, it does not work very well. For instance, that high resolution that you admire so much was the rock that Michael and I split upon.'

'Michael—and you,' repeated Eleanor mechanically, looking at Magdalen with a new expression, and with all the glow fading from her eyes.

'Yes, exactly. When Mr. Langstroth died, his son

and I had been engaged three years. We had always looked forward to being married—at least, I had—when our prospects improved. But when all this came out, and it was evident that Michael would have no assistance, and even refused what he might have had, there was an end to all that, of course. He was not well off. He never will be. He has not the spirit of—I won't say money-making, but of the most ordinary providence for the future. When he refused the provision that had been made for him, I knew that meant that I must give him up, and I did so. We have only been friends ever since, and——'

'You gave him up, then—oh, Miss Wynter, how could you?' Eleanor had exclaimed, before she knew what she was saying. The next moment she felt that she had committed an indiscretion, but she scarcely improved the situation by hastily exclaiming, 'Oh, I beg your pardon!'

'There is no need,' said Magdalen, quite composedly. 'One cannot enter into the details of such things with strangers. I acted, as I thought, for the best. Poor Michael! He is such a fine fellow in some ways, but so utterly, so hopelessly unpractical. He is not fit for his position, or for the present age; and yet he is so loyal, so true. I do not believe he ever cared, or ever will care, for any woman but me,' she added, looking pensively at Eleanor as she spoke. 'That sounds rather a self-confident thing to say, does it not? but I have known him so long—I have good grounds for thinking that I am right. He is not like those men who love here a day, and there a day, and another day somewhere else. . . . Poor Michael!'

While she spoke, Eleanor felt her heart as heavy as

lead within her. If Magdalen Wynter and Gilbert Langstroth were Otho's friends, and beloved of him, and this other man was shut out and disliked—yes, her idea that Magdalen knew more about Otho than she would say must be correct, and it seemed as if the whole thing were painful and discordant. But she supposed Miss Wynter must possess unusual powers of fascination, since Michael, after being treated by her in a manner which even her representations could not make to appear creditable, remained her friend. Had he not been seated there when they arrived?

Pondering painfully on this problem, she was roused by the opening of the parlour door, and looked up quickly, in the hope that it might be Otho, and that they would soon escape from this room, which had become a place that oppressed her.

CHAPTER XV

THREE WOMEN

‘Miss DIXON to see you, ma’am,’ said the servant. Eleanor looked on with some interest, as Magdalen greeted the young woman who entered—greeted her in a manner which, though cordial, was decidedly a patronising manner. Eleanor saw that the girl’s eyes fell almost instantly upon her, and dwelt upon her, surveying her with an eagerness and a curiosity which puzzled and somewhat annoyed her. Miss Askam saw, too, that the new-comer, though Magdalen spoke to her in a tone almost of intimacy, was not a lady, as the term is usually understood.

‘This is Miss Ada Dixon,’ observed Magdalen; ‘a friend of mine, who comes to sing with me sometimes. Ada, Miss Askam.’

Eleanor bowed to the young girl, who returned the movement with a somewhat affected contortion of the body, and said, ‘How do you do, Miss Askam?’ all in a certain manner which, while it could scarcely be called vulgar or awkward, was yet most distinctly not the manner of one accustomed to good society, or feeling at her ease in it. Eleanor looked at her with some curiosity. She saw an extremely pretty, slight girl, with a small face, of classical purity and correctness of outline, light

hazel eyes, a delicate complexion, a pretty *mignonne* figure, dressed in the most *outré* of would-be fashionable styles,—such second-rate, nay, third or fourth rate fashion as Bradstane milliners and dressmakers could supply, aggravated by an entire want in the wearer of any sense of harmony or fitness. She had piled upon her pretty little person many strange mixtures of material and structures of garments. A tightly fitting winter jacket, for example, of thick cloth, trimmed with fur, was a not unsuitable garment for the season ; but, instead of the serviceable silk neckerchief one would have expected to see worn with it, Miss Dixon had on a large and conspicuous arrangement of white lace, muslin, and blue ribbon, inclined to puff up under her chin in an unmanageable way, but kept within bounds by a massive silver locket and chain. This was but one example of the innumerable errors of taste and style which characterised the girl's toilette ; and yet, so pretty was she, so fresh and charming in her prettiness, that one forgot to criticise very severely such minor matters as clashing colours and incongruous materials.

‘And how are you, Ada?’ asked Miss Wynter.

‘Very well, thank you, Miss Wynter. There's nothing ails me, that I know of.’

‘You'll have a cup of tea, I daresay. Have you walked from Bradstane?’

‘Yes, Miss Wynter, I have.’

‘And how are you going to get home?’

‘I'm to leave here at half-past six, if you can do with me so long, and then Mr. Camm will meet me at the gate, he said.’

‘Meet you at the gate? Did you not ask him to come in?’

‘I did say that you’d told me to bring him in, Miss Wynter; but he never will. It’s no use. He has no more manners than a cat, and so I often tell him. I’m sure I’ve said many a time how bad it looks for him to come just so far for me, and not any farther.’

‘Oh, I think Mr. Camm is not very fond of me.’

‘Oh, Miss Wynter, I assure you——’ began Ada, reddening vividly.

‘There, never mind. Young men will do their own way, I know. You must know, Miss Askam,’ she added, turning to Eleanor, ‘Miss Dixon has a stalwart protector in the shape of her betrothed, Mr. Roger Camm.’

‘Oh, indeed.’

‘He is Dr. Langstroth’s greatest friend, you know,’ pursued Magdalen. ‘They live in the same house, and are quite inseparable.’

‘Yes,’ said Eleanor, wondering within herself whether this Roger Camm formed, intellectually or socially, any connecting link between Michael Langstroth and Ada Dixon, for it appeared to her that there was a considerable distance between them in every way.

Ada had now finished her tea. Of course, she did not reveal to her hostess that Roger Camm had said nothing would induce him to set foot within the Balder Hall walls, but that he would walk the two miles from Bradstane to meet his sweetheart, rather than let her return alone in the dark, or be dependent upon Miss Wynter’s good nature for an escort or a carriage.

‘Would you mind giving us a song, Ada?’ said the latter. ‘I am sure Miss Askam would like it, and I want to hear how you have progressed since the last time I heard you.’

‘Oh, with pleasure’ said Ada, with an undeniable

simper, as she pulled off her gloves and went to the piano. She unrolled some music, sat down, and had just run her fingers over the keys, when the door was again opened, and this time it was Otho who walked in. He paused a moment, looked round, and then said—

‘Holloa, Ada; you here! How do?’ And he nodded to her.

‘How do you do, Mr. Askam?’ said the girl, colouring a little, as she rose from the music-stool and made a kind of bow.

‘Now, don’t let Mr. Askam prevent us from hearing your song, child,’ said Magdalen, as Otho seated himself near her, and began to talk in a low voice.

Eleanor had watched the scene with a sense of displeasure, ill-defined, but strong. She now perceived that Ada had become nervous—that she cleared her throat, and did not seem quite able to begin. Thinking it was too bad of Magdalen to treat the girl in this way, and insist upon her singing before two perfect strangers, when she had very likely expected no other audience than her hostess herself, Eleanor, with the instinct which never failed her in such cases, rose and went to the piano.

‘What is your song called, Miss Dixon?’ she asked, kindly. ‘I will turn over the leaves for you, if I may.’

‘Oh, thank you, Miss Askam!’ said Ada, evidently much relieved.

Eleanor casually wondered why she should insist upon saying the name of every person to whom she spoke every time she addressed them. Magdalen and Otho interrupted their conversation for a moment, to look and listen, then resumed it as if no one but themselves were present.

Ada began to sing, in a fresh, tuneful soprano voice, a simple unaffected ditty which Eleanor rightly conjectured had been chosen for, rather than by her. It was a bright, rather pathetic little song, all about faith and love and the rewards of constancy, and when it was over Eleanor was able conscientiously to say—

‘Thank you very much. It is a very pretty song.’

Otho also murmured something, intended perhaps for thanks; and then Eleanor, who felt jarred and vexed in every nerve, from the uncongenial conversation in which she had lately partaken, wished Magdalen good afternoon.

‘Oh, are you going?’ exclaimed the latter. ‘Why must you go so soon?’

‘It is dark, and I think I have been here a good while. Are you ready, Otho?’

Otho looked at his sister for a moment. Then he also took his leave, and very soon they were riding away, side by side, down the avenue of the Balder Hall drive.

Eleanor drew a long breath as they went out at the gates, and emerged upon the high-road. She was conscious of a feeling of weariness, of a wish for a little cold fresh air—something bracing—and of a hope that Otho would not ask her anything about Miss Wynter. In that she was disappointed, for he inquired almost immediately what she thought of her.

‘I do not like her much, Otho,’ she said, as gently as she could. ‘It may be prejudice on my part, and one cannot tell after seeing a person for the first time, but there is something—I can hardly define it—a tone about her that I do not like.’

‘Just like a girl,’ said Otho, in a surly tone. ‘And

scarcely any women do like Magdalen. They can't forgive her for being so handsome.'

'She is very handsome indeed. Perhaps I may like her better when—or if I learn to know more of her. I should be sorry to dislike a friend of yours. But I must own that I could not get to like her, this afternoon.'

'Well, I don't suppose your likes or dislikes are of much importance to her,' he said, roughly.

'Not of the very least, I should think. It is to me that they are important, especially if I see much of Miss Wynter. By the way, who was that girl who came in? I could not quite understand her.'

'Oh, she's a *protégée* of Magdalen's—has been for years—a daughter of Dixon the stationer in the town. A queer little rat, isn't she, who tries to ape the ways of fine ladies. She's engaged to a very rough diamond of a man—anything but a fine gentleman; and I should have thought a counter-jumper or a commercial gent would have been more in her line. But no, she's going to marry this fellow. Roger Camm is his name. He is the manager at the Townend Mills, which Gilbert Langstroth and I work together. I don't like the fellow. He is so uppish, and yet he is so first-rate in his work, that if I sacked him I should not know where to put my hand on any one else like him.'

'A friend of Dr. Langstroth's, Miss Wynter said.'

'Yes, and that does not make me love him any the better, I can tell you.'

'You don't like Dr. Langstroth?'

'Like him!' echoed Otho, with brutal candour. 'I hate him. A wild, vapouring, sentimental fellow, that the women all rave about—why, I can't imagine, for his ways are cold enough to them, for all his handsome

face. He sets up to know better than any one else. In fact, he's a conceited prig, that's what Michael Langstroth is. The place would be well rid of him, in my opinion, if he'd only have the goodness to leave it. His brother Gilbert is worth a thousand of him.'

'In what way?' asked Eleanor curtly.

'In common sense, and knowledge of the world, and—everything that goes to make a man,' said Otho, angrily.

Eleanor hearkened, but made no reply to his words. She had not yet been with him twenty-four hours, but she already had an intuitive feeling as to what subjects would and would not be congenial to him.

'I see you've been hearing that old tale, have you?' Otho went on, glancing at her. 'Magdalen has been improving the shining hour, I perceive. But she does not usually slang Gilbert.'

'She did not "slang" anybody, as you call it,' said Eleanor, feeling ever a deeper repugnance as Otho more fully unfolded his views upon men and things, in language, too, of increasing nicety of expression.

'There are always two sides to a question,' he went on, 'and some people seem to me to forget that, but for Gilbert, his father would have had no money to leave; so that he was entitled to a voice in the disposal of it, if ever man was. His brother treated him like a dog at that time. I've always hated him for it, and I like to flaunt Gilbert in his face when he comes to stay with me. And as for Magdalen jilting Michael Langstroth, as they call it—*jilting* him!' Otho sneered—'I don't see why a woman is to be called a jilt because, when she has given a man full three years' trial, and at the end of the time finds that he is as far off as ever from being able to keep her, and has chucked up the one chance

there was of being provided for, she writes and tells him she thinks there had better be an end to it. And that's about what did happen between them.'

Eleanor made no reply to this further explanation of Otho's views. She felt disgusted—it was the only word for her condition. She felt as if she would like to make her opinion known to both Otho and Magdalen, upon this question of their conduct to Michael Langstroth. It was the first time in her life that she had been brought in contact with such doings as seemed to have been going on here. Long ago they had taken place, these ugly evil deeds of falsehood and injustice! Their effect upon the perpetrators did not seem to have been that of making them more urbane in manner, happy in disposition, or lofty in character. Poor Eleanor still felt very strong—felt as if she could cope with any fate that presented itself to her. But even now she did not feel so buoyant as before. The scenes she had that afternoon passed through struck deep root in her memory: Magdalen's cold, unattractive beauty, her cynicism, and the fear, which she had not been able quite to conceal, lest she was going to lose her hold over Otho (what was that hold? Eleanor wondered); Otho, talking, self-assertive, abusive, and, as Eleanor felt, deep down in her heart—miserable; Michael Langstroth, with whom she had been struck on their first meeting, and who haunted her, now that she knew his history, with his dark face, grave and almost stern, his eyes, bent upon her and Magdalen with, it seemed to her, the same expression for both—one of cold, imperturbable politeness and perfect indifference; the little dressed-up doll, with her fifth-rate airs and graces;—the whole entertainment had repelled and disgusted her. She would not cul-

tivate Magdalen's acquaintance, if she were doomed not to have another friend in Bradstane. And as for Dr. Langstroth, was he Magdalen's friend still? She had said so, but nothing in his manner or expression had confirmed it.

'I wish I knew,' Eleanor said to herself, as they stopped at their own hall-door. 'I wonder he ever condescended to speak to her again. It's the only thing about him that seems inexplicable,' was her further reflection, as Otho lifted her from her horse.

CHAPTER XVI

A FRIENDSHIP EXPLAINED

MICHAEL, tired himself, threw himself on to his tired horse when he left Magdalen's parlour, and rode down the drive and into the high-road. He had had a long and hard day, and there was weariness visible in the paleness of his face, which was a thinner and an older face than it had been.

But there was a theme in his mind, occupying it to the exclusion of his weariness, and this it was which engrossed him as he rode towards Bradstane.

'So that is Otho Askam's sister?' he reflected. 'I had nearly forgotten that he had a sister. Somehow, one never associates him with human, kindly connections of that kind. I remember her now, though, when we used to be children together in the Thorsgarth garden. She wore a blue velvet frock, I remember, and little kid shoes. I used to think her a pretty little thing. She is something more than a pretty little thing now, though'—he smiled a little to himself—'rather a superb young woman, I should say, and, judging from all one can gather from a flying glimpse and a few words about the antipodes of her brother in everything—yes, I should say everything. I wonder if she knows about his character? I wonder how she got to Balder Hall so

soon after her arrival? With him for a brother, and Magdalen for a friend—she is splendidly equipped, and need fear nothing, morally or socially. . . . She is a beautiful girl. Such eyes, and such a fine expression.’

Thinking such thoughts, he presently arrived at the Red Gables, where he had to devote himself to work till Roger came in for dinner. Eleanor had wondered, after she had heard Michael’s story, how he had been able to remain on terms of politeness with Magdalen, who said plainly that he was her friend still. But Magdalen had given no recital of the steps by which she and Michael had arrived at their present degree of mutual courtesy and neutrality. It was hardly likely that she should, when such a recital must have laid bare the very eye and core of her own humiliation, of the degradation which was constantly present in her consciousness, and of the disappointment and the failure which made her see all things in the light of bitterness and cynicism.

She had broken with Michael, suddenly, promptly, and pitilessly: she had not stayed her hand, she had not softened her expressions; she had dealt a blow which she knew might ruin his life, and that knowledge had not deterred her, or caused her hand to tremble as she struck. She had sent Michael—a broken man, as he thought—to recover his health, moral and physical, as best he might; and he had returned, saying he was glad that nothing remained of the man who had been Michael Langstroth, since that man had been a great fool.

When things have happened to a man which make him feel as if the sun had fallen out of the heavens, and the stars changed their courses, he is, no doubt, a little apt to feel astounded on finding, after a time, that it was not the sun nor the stars, but himself who was dis-

turbed and jolted out of his old orbit into a new one. But let him be astonished as much as he will—let him even be indignant, as he very often is, at such vagaries of the universe so distressing him—he cannot alter things. The sun goes on shining, and the stars pursue their appointed march, and by and by he—to descend from great things to small ones—also falls into some sort of progress, be it march, or shamble, or shuffle, or steady struggle onwards and upwards. This always happens if the man be a very man, and not an amorphous sort of thing without backbone or sinew.

In obedience to this law it had come to pass that Michael Langstroth, five years after he had been stricken down, found himself able to stand upright—found that he was still living, moving, working; could laugh when a joke tickled him, which it did pretty often; could feel hungry when he had fasted, and thought perhaps a little more of the nature of the provision set before him than he had formerly done. This last trait was, no doubt, if one argues rightly, a powerful sign that if he moved now easily enough, still it was in a different way, and on a different platform from the old ones.

On his return from Hastings, after the illness which followed his father's death and Magdalen's repudiation of him, Dr. Rowntree had attacked him, and gone near to kill him with kindness of a very practical sort; insisting that he was an old man, tired of hard work, who had long been wanting to retire, and had only been waiting till Michael should be ready to take his place. All tenders of payment for his generosity he had firmly and steadily put aside, till Michael had been forced to stop any such suggestions. He had finally accepted the doctor's goodness, as the latter had fully made up his

mind that he should ; and so it came to pass that, soon after his return to work, Michael had found himself in possession of a practice of his own, and also that the retirement of his old friend had called a rival into the field, another surgeon, who perhaps thought that the Bradstane circuit was too large for the unaided management of one man. Thus Michael, while he became better off than he had ever been before, in a pecuniary point of view, found at the same time that he must work with all his might, just to keep the lead—not to be swamped in the struggle. The practice he now had was not as lucrative as the practice of the old doctor, untroubled by any rival, had been, but it was a practice on which Michael could have afforded that marriage which had been his goal for three years. When he had come home and begun work, he had heard many rumours, many asseverations, even, that Magdalen Wynter and Otho Askam were to be married. Scandal-mongers said that she had jilted Michael in order that she might marry Otho. Michael had to steel his heart and his nerves and his whole moral man in a triple brazen armour, in order to receive these assaults without wincing, and in order to hear without shrinking the proofs adduced in support of the hypothesis—Otho's constant visits, namely, to Balder Hall, and Magdalen's graciousness to him. For his own part, with a natural revulsion of feeling, the result of the demolition of his blind trust in her, he was firmly persuaded that the marriage would take place ; but it did not. Months passed by, and the indignation at Magdalen's infidelity had merged into ridicule of her failure—if failure it were, for Otho's visits to Balder Hall continued with unabated regularity.

During these months Michael had never even seen her, and he took it for granted, without thinking very much about it, that he was not to see her any more, nor hold any intercourse with her. Then, one day, a messenger came in haste from Balder Hall, to Dr. Rowntree, to say that Miss Strangforth was very ill, and he was to go to her immediately. But Dr. Rowntree was not in Bradstane at the moment. Michael was, and of course there could be no question of hesitating or debating. He went to Balder Hall; was ushered straight into Miss Strangforth's room, where the first object he saw was Magdalen Wynter's face, pale and anxious, raised to look at him as he came in. Michael had just time to feel that all that he had been sure he would experience on first meeting her, was conspicuous by its absence—all that he would have thought it least likely that he should feel, he felt. It was she who showed the more agitation of the two. Her eyes fell, her lips fluttered—she could not meet Michael's gaze. She spoke in a low voice, timidly, deprecatingly. From that moment he felt master of the situation, and of her. It did not give him a more kindly feeling towards life in general, or towards Magdalen in particular, but it made him conscious he was a free man. It was he who from this day took the lead in the intercourse between Magdalen and himself—chose how far it should go, laid down the terms on which they should meet. Magdalen had said to Eleanor, 'We have been friends ever since.' Perhaps Michael would not have contradicted her, even had she asserted this before his face. But none could know better than Magdalen herself what Michael in reality felt for her now—none was better acquainted than herself with the nature of those ashes left after the

edifice of his faith in her had been so entirely consumed and demolished. She knew that she was powerless now to move him in any way—that he was stronger than she was, and that, instead of crushing him, she had exposed herself to the possibility of being crushed by him. He despised her—she knew it: he esteemed her no higher than his brother Gilbert, if he did not choose to visit his contempt upon her in the same way. She was his ‘friend,’ not because he could not tear himself away from her presence, but because she had now become to him a thing of so little consequence that it was not worth his while to avoid her. He had never said so to her, but she knew it, and it was more convenient to say to Eleanor Askam, ‘We are friends,’ than it would have been to explain to her the nature of the friendship.

And thus it can be understood how Michael this night thought more of Eleanor Askam, and felt more interest in her—of a purely speculative kind—than in the woman he had known and loved for so many years. He had cut himself off entirely from the Askam clan, as it were—Gilbert was mixed up with them; Magdalen and Otho were friends, and Otho was a man whom he disliked inevitably, from his very nature. The vision of this bright and beautiful girl, suddenly appearing in a quarter to which he was accustomed to consider himself a perfect stranger, had struck him, and he felt interested in her, as we feel interested in amusing or curious things with which we do not expect or desire to have any intimacy. And while he was waiting for Roger to come in to dinner, and ostensibly reading, he found himself half-dreaming, for he was sleepy, and ever the vision before his mental eyes was Magdalen’s scented, warm

parlour, with its ruddy glow of firelight cheering the dull afternoon, and the sudden appearance upon the scene of that bright and beautiful girl, with her open gaze, and her abundant life and fire.

At last Roger came in, apologising for being late.

'I went to meet Ada, and it is a good half-hour's walk from Balder Hall.'

'Oh, I've been at Balder Hall this afternoon, too. Who do you think I saw there?'

'Miss Askam—I've heard.'

'Otho Askam's sister. That is the light in which I saw her, I must confess.'

Roger shrugged his shoulders. They were as broad—he was as big, as clumsy, as saturnine as ever.

'Ada says she is very handsome.'

'Ay, she is! Handsome enough to make a sensation here, I can tell you.'

'Ah! In her brother's style?'

'No, indeed. I should say they had no two points in common, unless physiognomy lies most atrociously.'

'Wish her joy, I'm sure, then,' said Roger, drily.

'Just what I was thinking. Are you going out again to-night?' he added, for they had returned to the library, and he saw Roger collecting sundry songs and pieces of music.

'Yes. The usual rendezvous,' replied Roger.

'How go the rehearsals?'

'First-rate; if she would only leave it to me, and not go up to Balder Hall after every lesson, to get a second opinion.'

Michael laughed a little sarcastically.

'That must be flattering to your *amour propre*, both as teacher and betrothed,' he said.

‘Very much so. Never mind ! When we are wed, the Balder Hall alliance must come to an end.’

‘Now, I don’t call that fair, but the very reverse,’ said Michael, emphatically. ‘She would have just as much right to go to Miss Wynter and say, “Never mind ! When we are wed, the Red Gables alliance must come to an end.”’

‘Oh no ! There’s a great difference.’

‘Yes, there is. There is the difference that you could make her give up Miss Wynter, and that she could not make you give up me.’

‘No one makes me give up my friend,’ said Roger, deliberately ; ‘neither wife nor mistress, nor any one else. It is no true wife’s part to wish to separate her husband and his friends.’

‘A wife has the strictest right to say the same thing with regard to her husband. And you have not a shadow of right, Roger, to say she shall not know Miss Wynter when she is married to you. If you make it a *sine quâ non*, you ought to tell her so in advance.’

‘You are very hot about it. I’d as soon she had a serpent for a friend as——’ He nodded expressively.

‘Well, I say you have no right to say so,’ said Michael, ‘and I recommend you to think it over on your way down. You talk about educating her where she is deficient—poor little thing ! but it isn’t education to say “you shall” and “you shall not.”’

‘You may be right,’ said Roger, deliberately. ‘Only, please, do me the justice to own that I did not say how I should stop the alliance. I only said it should come to an end. There is such a thing as persuasion.’

‘Oh, if you are going to get out of it in that way——’

‘Good night,’ said Roger, amiably. ‘Don’t leap so readily to conclusions another time.’

With which he went out, leaving Michael laughing to himself.

The latter had once again to turn out in the raw November air, to see some patients in the town. As he returned, he passed the shop of Mr. Dixon, the Bradstane stationer, and looking up, saw a bright light burning behind the red curtains of the windows on the second story. Distant sounds of music also came to his ears. He smiled and sighed, both at once; and in his mind there were running thoughts, almost identical with those which Roger Camm had thought of Michael’s own engagement, eight years ago, to Magdalen Wynter.

‘If she is the girl to make him happy, well and good. But I wish he had chosen differently. He talks about marrying into his own sphere—such bosh! Small shopkeepers are not his sphere, let him say what he likes. If Ada Dixon had been a squire’s daughter, I suppose he would have discovered that after all he was a clergyman’s son, and a gentleman, her social equal. Now it suits him better to call himself a working man, and say that like must wed like, to be happy. It is a pity; he might have had a career, only she drags him back.’

He called at Dr. Rowntree’s, and had half an hour’s chat with the old man; then back to his own house, his pipe, and a treatise on some new surgical experiments with which it behoved him to make acquaintance.

CHAPTER XVII

ROGER CAMM'S COURTING

ROGER CAMM, in the meantime, had carried himself, with his roll of music in his hand, to see his betrothed at her father's house, and was having a less delightful time of it, perhaps, than Michael pictured to himself.

The Dixon *ménage* had in no way fallen off, either in substantial internal comfort or in outward vulgarity and pretentiousness. Mrs. Dixon was even more bent upon rising in the world than her husband: he still adhered to the legitimate means by which a man may get on, by steady attention to his business and judicious retail impositions, which, when counted up at the end of the year, generally amounted to a nice little wholesale sum. Mrs. Dixon had, however, advanced in breadth of view as years had passed. She held by the doctrine that children were bound to help their parents, and she looked to Ada to help them in pushing the family fortunes.

Mr. Dixon was what himself and his neighbours called a warm man, but he was cautious about bragging of his comfortableness and his competence. He looked the brag instead of speaking it. He had exalted views as to his own position and importance, but they were tempered by a strong mixture of the strictest and sternest common sense.

Ada had returned to them just before she was seventeen, nearly two years ago, a finished young lady, playing the piano, singing, drawing (from anything but nature), and with a smattering of execrable French. She had a thousand airs and graces, a fine contempt for her father's business, and a meritorious sense of shame whenever it was mentioned in her hearing, and she was exceedingly and undeniably pretty.

There had been great discussions as to the part Ada was to take in the establishment when she left school. Mr. Dixon fell in with the wifely resolve that their child should never go behind the counter—he quite understood that she was neither designed nor finished for anything of the kind. But his transports in other respects fell short of those of his consort.

‘I don't see,’ he observed, after Ada had been a few months at home, ‘that she does much that's useful, or ever goes into the kitchen, or makes a pudding’ (infallible criterion of feminine value and worth to a certain order of masculine mind), ‘or her own clothes; and yet she often seems to me to have a deal of time on her hands that she doesn't quite know what to do with; and as for money, she has no notion of the value of it. It's awful.’

‘And how should she, I should like to know?’ asked Mrs. Dixon, indignantly. ‘A child like her! She'll learn fast enough. And then I expect her to marry well. I don't know who ought to if she ought not.’

‘You have to marry very high up indeed to have no need ever to think of money or housekeeping.’

‘I shall teach her what's necessary, of course. And you wrong her, Dixon, when you say she does no dress-making. I'm sure she's most industrious. The time she

spends in her room, altering things, and trying them on—both hats and bonnets, and dresses too. If you could see her, you'd say no more.'

'Perhaps I should be too much astonished,' said Dixon, with a gleam of his native Yorkshire shrewdness. 'There's such a thing as thinking too much of dress, and I'm afraid our Ada——'

'Drat the man!' said Mrs. Dixon, very sharply. 'Will nothing satisfy him? First he grumbles that she doesn't do her dressmaking, and then he grumbles that she does. It's just like a man. Either they are up in the clouds, or they are down in the depths, or——'

'That's the shop,' said Mr. Dixon, feigning to hear the bell, and alertly running away.

'Can't he see?' Mrs. Dixon said, within herself, when she was left alone. 'Ada will marry a gentleman, of course. She's as pretty as she can be, and a wonderful taste in dress, and a perfect lady in manners, and with Miss Wynter for her friend, and constantly going up to see her. Miss Wynter sees the best of society. Besides, I've seen the gentlemen look at her, many a time. Didn't I hear Mr. Gilbert Langstroth, the very last time he was here, say to her, quite respectfully, "Why, Miss Dixon, I wondered what beauty had taken up her winter quarters in Bradstane"? And Dixon pretending that Mr. Langstroth is always sneering at people, and that he would never have said such a thing to any lady, or anywhere where it could be taken seriously! And him that sees such high society in London! And Mr. Askam—didn't he say to me, "How's your lovely daughter, Mrs. Dixon? I hear she's turning all the young men's heads"? It's true Mr. Askam has a free and easy way with him, and they say he means no good by any girl he pays com-

pliments to ; but then it was me he spoke to—not Ada. Straws show which way the wind's blowing, and I say there's no knowing what may happen.'

Time passed, and neither of the gentlemen whom Mrs. Dixon had thought of became more marked in their attentions. Nay, what with Ada's magnificence, and the scarcity of matches worthy her consideration, there were even mortifications in store for the maternal ambition. It was a distinct if not an acknowledged mortification when Mary Metcalfe, a quiet-looking girl, with three sisters under her—such a family of them,—a girl with no beauty to boast of, and not a scrap of fashionable education ; a girl Ada's own age to a day, and who had once been her playfellow—got engaged to one of the most well-to-do young farmers in all the country round. Not that Ada would have listened for a moment to any farmer but a gentleman-farmer, and of course young Simpson would never have had the audacity to ask her. (Whether from bashfulness or other reason, it is quite certain that young Simpson never did ask her.) And yet, it was distinctly mortifying to sit in one's pew, and hear Mr. Johnson read out the banns of James Simpson and Mary Metcalfe. No one grudged Mary a good husband, poor girl ; but Ada—it really seemed as if, in the proper order of things, Ada should have come first.

While the coming gentleman of high degree tarried, Roger Camm appeared upon the scene, and very soon made it manifest that he had the audacity, not only to love, but to declare himself. Ada, to Mrs. Dixon's severe disappointment, was much pleased, charmed, nay, self-complacent. Mrs. Dixon alone was really against the match, saying many disparaging things of the suitor's appearance, position, and prospects, and of everything

connected with him ; and persisting, with the tenacity of a weak and vain woman about her favourite object, that if they would only wait, Ada would do much better.

Mr. Dixon was very firm.

‘Ada could not do much better,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t have wished a better husband for her : he’s strong, and he’s clever, and he knows what he is about. They trust him absolutely, his employers do. He’s making an uncommonly good thing out of those jute factories down the river, and if he isn’t a partner in the concern within a few years, my name is not Simon Dixon. I wouldn’t force the girl, but she tells me she wants him, and if so she shall have him ; and thankful I am for her to do so well. So let’s hear no more about it.’

No more was said about it, openly ; but Mrs. Dixon rebelled in secret. She knew Dixon too well to oppose him overtly, but she thought to herself that Ada and Roger were not married yet. She disliked him heartily : his awkward gait, his rough ways ; his habit of laughing at her notions about gentility ; the queer, rude things he said. And, above all, he galled her by insisting upon calling himself a working man, and telling Ada how she was going to be a working man’s wife.

‘As if I brought her up for that !’ the mother indignantly thought. He was just a bear, she felt, and about as fit as a bear to marry their Ada.

The engagement had now been going on for six months, and the marriage, it was thought, should not take place for another year. Roger did not rebel against this. Loving Ada with his whole soul, and as unselfishly as man could love, he yet saw very clearly that her love for him was not as his love for her. He was sure that gentleness, and kindness, and the educating influence of

companionship and gradually growing sympathy, would teach her this love—as he had said to Michael, he had to educate her in some things (in the very art or nature of unselfish love, could he but have known it); and with a kind of sublime patience and sublime blindness, which might have been ridiculous if they had not been utterly pure of selfishness, he calmly set himself to wait out the year that had yet to elapse, and another after it, if necessary, and in that time to teach Ada to love him as he loved her. The process was not an exhilarating one; the effort was based upon the assumption of an impossibility—the assumption, namely, that such love can be taught. But Roger did not know this.

Just now he and Ada had found a pastime in which both had something in common. They were rehearsing songs for a concert at which the amateur talent of the neighbourhood was to display itself for the benefit of the church schools, and incidentally for the pride and delight of its own soul and the edification of the neighbourhood at large. This great event always took place in the month of December, and on this occasion Ada was for the first time to appear on the platform. She was to sing in a duet with her patroness, Miss Wynter, and Roger was to play the accompaniment for them.

Despite this congenial occupation, Roger and his betrothed this evening had several differences of opinion. Ada was excited about her visit to Balder Hall, related every incident that had occurred, and every word that had been spoken there after her own arrival upon the scene; dwelling upon them with persistency—describing minutely Miss Askam's appearance, voice, and gestures, and especially her graciousness in coming and standing by her, Ada Dixon, while she sang. Also Magdalen's

dress, and Otho's long conversation with her, and the new-fashioned table-covers which Miss Wynter had on her small tea-table. All this was inexpressibly galling to Roger, who hated what he called 'that lot,' with an uncompromising scorn. He would have had Ada stand as coolly aloof from them as he did himself, but she would not. Balder Hall and its inmates and visitors were to him the abode of a false woman, unworthy of consideration, and the rendezvous of her intimates. To Ada, on the contrary, Balder Hall was the fairy palace where, to speak metaphorically, the roofs were of gold and the windows of diamonds ; the woman in it was her ideal of beauty, elegance, fashion, and superiority in general, and the woman's friends and acquaintances were other bright apparitions belonging to the same enchanted sphere. She was very eloquent to-night, partly because she wished to provoke Roger, partly because her mind was quite filled with the afternoon's entertainment. He could, as he said, get neither rhyme nor reason from her, and when he returned to the Red Gables, earlier than usual, there was a cloud on his brow.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WILD-GOOSE CHASE

IT was nearly a fortnight later, and the dusk of evening crept over everything. From the window of her sitting-room, facing south, with a little inclination to west, Eleanor could catch a glimpse of the evening sky, but not of the setting sun itself, which came but little north of west at this time of the year. She could see the terraces, spreading downwards to the river-side, and she had a partial view of the stream itself, leaden in hue, but swift in the race. The tall, heavy trees stood motionless: one realised all the stateliness, and with it all the melancholy, of the place. For Thorsgarth had always been a melancholy house.

Eleanor sat in the embrasure of the window, with a half-open book in her lap. It had grown too dark to read any longer, and she raised her eyes from the page and looked out. As the gloaming fell, the firelight gleamed out more strongly, but it did not reach as far as where she sat, and the cold light of the departing day was all that fell upon her face. Perhaps this cold light lent something to the impression of sadness, and even of sternness, which had overcast her countenance since she had come home. Whether from that cause or from some other, it was quite certain that there was a slight expres-

sion of sternness upon her lips ; the strength and resolution which lay beneath her ripe and gracious beauty had decidedly stepped to the front.

While she looked forth, with this expression deepening on her face, there came a short, heavy knock upon the door ; before she had time to answer, the curtain was pushed aside, and Otho came in.

‘Otho !’ she exclaimed, for it was the first time he had entered the room since her arrival.

‘Good afternoon,’ he said, glancing round. ‘What are you doing here, all alone ?’

‘Reading Homer,’ said Eleanor, promptly, with a rather wicked gleam in her eye. As she had expected, an expression of slight alarm crossed Otho’s countenance. But he drew a chair forward and sat down.

‘Is that how you amuse yourself here ?’ he asked.

‘One way,’ she replied, rather curtly. She had perceived, very shortly after her arrival, that Otho was vexed with her presence, and had resolved in consequence to take her own course. He had been disappointed to find that she never uttered a word as to the dullness of Bradstane or its want of society, nor ever mentioned any idea of deserting it. Women with ‘resources within themselves’ were, of course, an unknown species to Otho—he would vaguely have called them ‘blues,’ if asked for his views on the subject. His sister must be a blue ; and after a moment given to reflection on the situation, he burst into a short, rough laugh.

‘Ha, ha ! No wonder that you and Magdalen don’t get on. And if that’s the sort of thing you have a fancy for, you never will. She’s clever, deucedly clever, is Magdalen, but it isn’t in the *dead languages* that she

excels.' And he laughed again, as if some inner thought greatly diverted him.

'If she troubles herself as little as I do whether we get on or not, she will be very indifferent about it,' said Eleanor, annoyed in a truly girlish fashion at thus having 'Magdalen' always thrust at her.

'Jealous!' said Otho, with his great guffaw, rubbing his hands together.

Eleanor felt her face in a flame.

'Jealous—of that woman!' was the thought in her mind, but she had self-control enough to let it remain a thought. She merely smiled.

'Did you learn nothing but Greek,' pursued Otho, 'when you were at college?'

'Why, of course, you goose. What would be the use of learning nothing but Greek?'

'Well, I certainly never could see the use of learning it—for me, at any rate,' said Otho. 'But I mean, didn't you go in for French, and music, and those things?'

'Well, I should hardly ask such a question as that. One "goes in," as you call it, for French as naturally as for English. Aunt Emily always had some French person or other about. But Greek was a labour of love.'

'It seems to me that you must be what they call a blue,' said Otho, vaguely.

'Does it? I'm not conscious of being of a different complexion from other young women. Aunt Emily, poor dear, thought the reverse. She considered that I was brought up too much with Paul, and altogether too like a boy. She always said that if I had mixed more with girls I should have been more alive to—oh, well, she thought it would have been better for me.'

'She thought that if you had been a bit more like

other girls, you wouldn't have let that parson slip, but would have married him instead of coming rambling off here, where you don't know a creature, and have to pass your time reading the "Iliad"; and I can tell you I agree with her,' said Otho.

'Let him slip? I never tried to catch him,' said Miss Askam, touchy, despite her masculine education, upon this point.

'I never said you did,' remarked Otho. 'However, I'm glad you are intellectual and independent, for now I need not apologise for leaving you alone. I'm going away this evening.'

'Are you? Where?'

'Oh, over into Friarsdale, on business. I don't know when I shall be back. Some time before Christmas, of course, because Gilbert will be here then. You'll have to do as well as you can.'

'I shall do very well, thank you. I shall return a few of those numerous calls I have received. I like some of the people very much. I don't think they look so dangerous as you seemed to think them. But, of course, tastes differ. And on the first fine day I intend to have a ride.'

'Yes, do. And William will attend to you—the boy you have had before. I've given orders for him to be at your service whenever you want to go out. He's a steady lad, and understands all my horses. And I think you couldn't do better than keep to "Dalesman," Eleanor, for riding. He's a perfectly safe lady's horse, and yet he's spirited.'

'I liked him very much when I had him before. . . . Isn't evening an odd time to be setting off on a journey? Where is this Friarsdale that you speak of?'

‘Oh, I shall only go to Darlington to-night, and put up with a fellow I know there. Then I shall drive on into Friarsdale to-morrow.’

He still had not told her where it was, she noticed, nor what he wanted there. She was not going to ask again, and in a short time Otho said he must be off, wished her good afternoon, and departed. He had gone in intending to recommend her to cultivate Miss Wynter’s society, but the conversation which had taken place had caused him to abandon this design.

‘Magdalen and she will never get on. I shall leave them both to it. It’s plain to me that Eleanor is no fool in some things, whatever she may be in others; but I verily believe she’d sooner have old Lady Winthrop for a chum, or one of those charity-blanket Blundell girls, than Magdalen.’

In which surmise Otho was perfectly correct.

‘It’s a rum sort of thing altogether,’ he reflected. ‘I shall ask Gilbert what he thinks about it.’

It was on the following day that Eleanor, looking forth, decided that there was a change in the weather, which decidedly entitled her to the ride she had spoken of to Otho. The clouds had parted, and the blue smiled forth, and the sun lent his aid to enliven the prospect. Eleanor promptly ordered her horse to be saddled and brought round immediately after an early lunch. In obedience to this order, it appeared, and she was ready for it shortly before two o’clock. She found the lad William holding her horse, and Barlow, the old butler, standing at the door. William, it is necessary to state, was not a native of Bradstane, nor, indeed, of Teesdale at all, but of Swaledale, to the south, of which locality he was very proud, and concerning which he was in the habit of relating

many tales of wonder. It was a subject on which his mistress already loved to draw him out, and he was nothing loath to discourse upon it. He had begun to plume himself amongst the other servants on being Miss Askam's own retainer, and would have felt bitterly injured had she selected any one but himself as her attendant.

She told old Barlow that she did not expect to be back much before five, and he, by reason of long service, and in the capacity of 'friend of the family,' took upon himself to ask if he might venture to inquire in which direction she thought of riding.

'Oh yes, Barlow, you had, perhaps, better know. I think of going round by Cotherstone, to a place called Catcastle.'

'It's a very wild country, miss,' said Barlow, with a look of alarm. 'A very bleak road, indeed, Miss Askam, for a winter's day.'

'It is not like a winter's day this afternoon, and I shall do nothing rash, you may be sure,' she said, repressing with a little feeling of guiltiness the further information that 'romantic Deepdale's slender rill' had taken such hold on her imagination, that after carefully consulting an ordnance map, and finding that all the three places—Cotherstone, Catcastle, and Deepdale—were within a circuit of ten miles, she had resolved to see them that afternoon.

'I don't think Mr. Askam would quite approve,' began Barlow, with an anxious look.

'Oh, Mr. Askam is away,' said Eleanor, wilfully. 'And, Barlow, be sure to have some tea quite ready by five o'clock, for I am sure I shall want it very badly when I get in.'

So saying, she chirped to her horse, and it carried her quickly round the bend in the drive, William following her. Barlow stood at the door, and shook his venerable head.

‘A real Askam for wilfulness,’ he said within himself, ‘but as sweet as an angel in temper. Eh, dear! If poor dear Mr. Otho was but a bit more like her! I don’t know where he’ll end, I’m sure.’

Again shaking his head with the true Jeremiah shake of an old retainer who sees his most cherished prejudices overridden by a new generation, Barlow closed the hall-door and retired to his own quarters.

Eleanor rode quickly forth, feeling the air and the sunshine thrill through her, and rejoice her very soul. She lifted her beautiful face upwards towards the field of blue—albeit a pale November blue, one could see the colour it was meant for—and inhaled the fresh, westerly breeze, which had in it, could she have understood its ‘feel,’ a promise of north in the not distant future.

They trotted briskly through Bradstane town, past the shops, and up the cobble-stoned street, sharply on through long, unlovely Bridge Street, and so over the old stone bridge under the castle crag, and upon a road on the Yorkshire side of the river, leading through the village of Lartington to that of Cotherstone.

‘Is that building a church, William?’ she asked, pointing to one with her whip.

‘Yes, miss,’ he replied, riding up and touching his hat.

‘I think it is the smallest one I ever saw,’ she remarked.

‘By your leave, miss, I have seen one, and been in it, not above half the size—at Lunds,’ he said, his eyes growing round, and his face red, from which signs Miss

Askam knew infallibly that he had a tale of wonder to unfold.

‘Indeed ; and where is Lunds ?’ she asked.

‘If you please, miss, on Abbotside Common, going from Hawes to Hell Gill,—to Kirby Stephen, that is ; it lies off on the common, to the right. ’Tis a rare small ’un ; and there was another peculiar thing about it, too.’

‘What was that ?’

‘Well, the folk about was poor, vary poor indade ; and they couldn’t afford a bell. So for many a year th’ sexton used to climb to t’ top of th’ church—’twere such a vary lile church, you see—wi’ a tin can full o’ stones in’s hand, and wi’ that he used to shake it to and fro, so as to mak’ the stones rattle, and a’ called out at the same time, “Boll-loll, boll-loll, boll-loll !” at top of his voice while t’ congregation got all come in, and then he clammert down again, and went in hissels ! That were i’stead of a bell, you know ; they couldn’t get t’ money to buy one. Ay, Lunds church was known for miles around.’

‘I should think so,’ said Miss Askam, laughing. ‘Do you know of any more customs like that ?’

‘No, ma’am ; except there was another vary small church where there was a queer habit, more like than a custom——’

‘Indeed,’ said she, amused within herself at the distinction.

‘A vary lile one it was, too, i’ Langstrothdale——’

‘Langstrothdale—where’s that ?’ she asked, quickly.

‘On the other side o’ Cam Fell, miss. They do say that that’s where the doctor’s and Mr. Gilbert’s family first came fro’, and that they’re not Durham at all, but Yorkshire. I reckon doctor desarnes to be a Yorkshireman, choose what Mr. Gilbert——’

‘Never mind about that. What of the little church?’

‘Only that th’ congrygation there was vary poor too, and it was a door as they were in want of,—just like i’ Lunds they couldna get a bell. So, when service was o’er, they used to stick a big thorn in th’ doorway, to fill it up; but shape’ (the sheep) ‘used to get in in t’ winter weather, and make a shelter of it; and they had to be cleared out regular, ivery Sunda’—that’s all, miss,’ said William, exhausted with his two prolonged narrative efforts, and falling into his place behind again.

Eleanor rode on, smiling to herself at the picture of the man who shook a tin can full of stones, and cried ‘boll-loll’ from the top of the church to summon the congregation. He must have had lusty lungs, she thought, that Yorkshire sexton.

Cotherstone was safely reached about three o’clock, and Eleanor must ride down to the river, and see where Balder emptied his waters into Tees, and repeat to herself—

‘Then Balder, one bleak garth was thine;
And one sweet brooklet’s silver line.’

The ‘sweet brooklet’ was just then rushing onwards, muddy and swollen, in anything but a silver line. Eleanor turned back, and finding that William’s knowledge of the country here became rather misty, made inquiries in the village as to the nearest way to ‘Catcastle Crag.’

Visible astonishment arose upon the countenance of the rustic whom she addressed—an elderly labourer, who made answer, after the wary manner of the English of the north—

‘It’s a vary rough rooäd to Catcastle.’

‘Is it? Well, would you tell me the nearest way?’

‘Your horse won’t go within half a mile of the crag.’

‘Well, I would like to know how you get within half a mile of the crag, if you will please to tell me the nearest way.’

‘Nearest rooäd is o’er yonder,’ was the reply, accompanied by a sweep of a long and stalwart arm, which sweep might embrace some fifteen or twenty miles of country.

Eleanor laughed, and after some difficulty induced her informant so far to commit himself as to mention one or two roads by name, which thing he did very reluctantly; but she gathered from what he said that she had ‘three miles and a piece’ to ride, not continuing on the same road, but always keeping to the left whenever cross roads came, and that by doing this she would arrive as near Catcastle Crag as her horse would take her; while by skirting round it, still to the left, she would come to a road leading to Deepdale, and thence home.

‘But,’ observed her interlocutor, with a look of tolerant pity, ‘I think it’s something of a fool’s errand, of a day like this. Wind’s changing, and we’ll have frost before midnight.’

Eleanor thanked him, and set off cheerily, thinking with a smile that the tea would have to wait till after five o’clock, and that she hoped Barlow would not be worrying his old head about her, or sending in all directions to meet her.

The three miles ‘and a piece’ proved exceedingly like the ‘mile and a bittock’ of story. That is, the three miles were presently accomplished, but the ‘piece’ stretched far before them, and the light was no longer so clear as it had been. Moreover, the wary peasant’s

prophecy was being fulfilled with a startling promptness. The wind had already shifted, and was blowing from the north, almost in her face, keen and piercing. Every cloud had disappeared, and the sky was of a crystalline clearness, ominous of coming frost; and still Catcastle Crag—though they could see what Eleanor imagined must be that remarkable eminence—grew no nearer. They seemed to have got round it, and it still kept provokingly to their left, with the road, and several fields, and a thicket between them and it.

‘I suppose,’ said Eleanor within herself, ‘that they call this part of the road a “piece,” because they have no numbers with which to count its length in miles.’ She had grown thoughtful. Dusk had fallen over her high spirits, as well as over the landscape.

At length she called William, and said she thought they had better leave the crag and keep to the homeward road, a proposition to which he yielded a cheerful assent, and fell back into his place. Eleanor rode on; she supposed they were on the right road, but it wound on and on without seeming to lead to anywhere in particular. She was sure, from what she remembered of the map, that they ought to be at Deepdale before now. Deepdale, she knew, was a wood. But here was no sign of any wood to be seen. The road was a bare, bleak road, with a rough stone wall on either side, a road which must have been dreary and monotonous at any season; but which now, in the grim November evening, with the dusk rapidly falling—not a sound to be heard but the faint piping of a bitter wind from the black wall of fells to the north; not a sight to be seen save the bare fields on either side, and at a little distance a clump of trees—was melancholy in the extreme; and Eleanor, looking at

the frowning escarpments to the left, no longer felt that her listed to

‘Climb Catecastle’s giddy crag,’

as, before setting off, she had fondly hoped to do ere her return. She was of a nature at once poetical and highly imaginative, and for all the hard, stony prose of the road, there was something attractive to her in the very bleakness and chillness of it;—that faintly moaning wind seemed to whisper that it came from the north, that it had its cradle in the ultimate Thule, where its breath was more piercing even than here.

She felt all the force of the contrast to this scene which was presented by the sudden appearance of a light gleaming out of the clump of trees before spoken of.

‘Oh,’ she said, quickly, ‘there must be a house behind those trees—some place, at any rate, where we can ask if we are in the right road to Bradstane.’

She rode on, and they presently stopped at the door of a wayside farmlet, if such a term be admissible. William knocked, and a young woman, with a gentle, handsome countenance, and in stature like some female Hercules, came to the door, looked at them with astonishment in her great clear gray eyes, and asked to know their will.

Eleanor preferred her request for information as to whether they were on the right road for Bradstane; she said not a word now of Catcastle.

‘For Bradstane! Eh, what! but ye’re mony a mile out o’ t’ straight rooad,’ was the reply, which struck dismay into her hearer.

On further investigation, however, it turned out to be not so bad as had seemed at first. They must keep

straight on for half a mile till they came to the Balder Beck, which they would have to ford, and then they would be in the right road, and five miles away from Bradstane.

‘Straight along, do we go? and is the beck deep?’ asked Eleanor, thinking of the darkness.

‘Straight down this lane. Deep?—nay, you needna be afeard—not a little bit, you needna. It’s no a bad ford;—a bit swollen with th’ rains just now, but safe enough. I’d show you th’ way, only my child’s ill, and I canna lave it. But you cannot go wrong. And th’ doctor’s not been gone five minutes. Happen you may light on him in th’ lane, and then, if you’re in doubt, you might ask him. He kens all th’ rooads rarely,—both them that’s bad and them that’s good.’

‘Thank you,’ said Eleanor, not deriving so much comfort from this suggestion as the woman seemed to think would be natural; for during her short residence in Bradstane she had not been left ignorant of the relations between Michael Langstroth, his brother, her brother, and Magdalen Wynter. The version of the story given to her by the latter had been supplemented by revised ones, explained and annotated in a very different spirit. Eleanor felt that, taken all in all, she would prefer not to overtake Dr. Langstroth.

It was not, however, very likely that they would do so, for he would probably ride on quickly, being, as the woman said, well acquainted with all the roads; whereas they had to go very slowly, being ignorant of them, and the dark fast falling.

She wished the woman good-night, and rode on. Presently they came in sight of the ford, or, at any rate, of the beck which they had to ford at this juncture. It was rushing along, brown, noisy, and swollen, and

Eleanor, though a hardy horsewoman, drew back a little as she saw it. Which, and where might be the ford? Whether to venture across, or to return all the dreary way they had ridden—ten miles or more? As she paused, debating, her eyes strained through the dusk on the other side; she almost hoped, now, that she might see a figure; but there was nothing except some gaunt trees, and as for sounds, the rattle of the beck drowned them all in the noise it made.

Tired of reflecting, and noticing a broad mark, as if wheels had here entered the stream, and a corresponding one on the other side, showing that they had safely emerged from it, Eleanor put her horse at the water, telling William to wait till she was across. The boy was not old enough, nor possessed of sufficient self-confidence, to make the lady pause till he had tried the ford himself; he felt unhappy, but did as he was told. She found herself in a moment in the midst of the roar and the darkness. About the middle of the stream, her horse displayed an evident desire to diverge to the right hand, down-stream. Eleanor, seeing the cart-tracks faintly on the other side, a little to the left, and bewildered with the rush and the noise and the swirl of the waters, became somewhat confused, and persisted in pushing the animal's head up-stream. In a moment her horse plunged into a hole, so deeply that she felt the water washing round her own knees. She gave an involuntary short cry, and heard a loud despairing—

‘Oh, Lord, miss, what shall I do?’

The tragic utterance restored her to herself. She gave her horse his head, and he, after another wild plunge or two, and a desperate, scraping scramble, succeeded in pulling himself up and taking his own way;

went first a little to the right, and then a little to the left, and emerged in the cart-track.

Her servant, following, came through high and dry, but with chattering teeth.

‘What is the matter? Are you afraid?’ she asked, and was much astonished to hear the only answer he gave—a piercing view-halloo. There was a moment’s silence, then the halloo was answered from some distance before them, and William, saying, ‘You bide here a minute, miss,’ rode on.

‘What can he be thinking of?’ she speculated, in some annoyance. ‘Leaving me here in the cold! I shall follow him.’

It was a good resolution, but not easy to carry out. She began to feel the cold stealing over every limb, while her soaked habit hung down, and seemed like a mass of ice, dragging her downwards. She could now see only a glimmer of the surrounding country, and the angry beck—black, flecked with specks of white, rushing and roaring as it seemed to her with redoubled force. A feeling of fright and alarm at the loneliness of it, the darkness and the wildness, overcame her. She felt herself trembling in every limb. A wild suspicion that William had taken flight, and did not intend to return, seemed to turn her to stone.

She jerked the reins, putting her horse at the little bank she had to climb, with the idea that the motion of riding would restore the circulation to her benumbed limbs; but it did not. She felt the cold seize her very vitals; unconsciously she slipped from her seat, crying out almost without knowing it, ‘William!’

Her own voice sounded hoarse and far off, yet she dimly heard sounds of other horses coming rapidly

towards her, vaguely beheld a rider—two riders, glimmering on her sight. Then she heard a voice say, ‘Miss Askam!’ in tones of astonishment, saw a man vault from his horse—all in vague, magnified proportions; and then for two or three moments she was so cold that she knew nothing at all.

CHAPTER XIX

INEVITABLE

MICHAEL, after leaving the cottage of the tall young woman with the sick child, and delaying a little, to let his horse drink from the beck, had safely crossed the ford which had proved so disastrous to Eleanor, and was riding peaceably and slowly. In his life there had always been present one negative blessing which he had not perhaps recognised with the active gratitude which it deserved; implanted in his heart was a love of Nature and of her things—a keen recognition of the beauty of every season and every weather. He was not in the habit of talking about it; perhaps he did not know himself how strong it was—how fundamental a part of his mental constitution it formed. But it was there, and it was manifested in the fact that oftentimes, though wearied and busy, he could not force himself to ride onwards in haste, even over the roads that were very familiar to him; could not neglect to notice the page that was silently and lovingly spread for him by that friend who ‘never did betray the heart that loved her.’ Even on an afternoon like this, he found time to go slowly, and receive the silent influence of the scene into his heart; and did not refuse to let the brooding solemnity of the darkening sky, or the

bodiful whisper of the stealing wind, tell their tale to him.

It was this vagrant humour, this unconfessed unwillingness to desert the ample exterior nature for the shelter and confinement of a roof and walls, which had caused him to be so little advanced on the road, that a loud halloo came distinctly to his ear; and after waiting a moment to hear if it should be any preconcerted signal, he concluded it to be a cry for help, and answered it, turning back down the lane towards the ford. In a few moments he was met by the ingenuous William, panting, and presenting an appearance of extreme disorder.

‘What’s the matter? Was it you who called?’

‘Yes, sir, if you please, sir, Miss Askam is nearly drowned; leastways, her horse had a very bad tumble in th’ ford. A woman told us you was on afore, and I made bold to call upon you.’

Michael made no answer, but rode back to the ford, as fast as the darkness and the rough road would allow him. His keen eyes, well accustomed to search the country by this doubtful light, discerned the form of a woman on horseback; he saw that she drooped and wavered, and he heard the half-inarticulate cry she gave. He sprang from his horse just in time to catch her as she slipped from her saddle, and in so doing he discovered that her riding habit was dripping, and heavy as lead with the icy water with which it was filled. He wasted no time in wondering how she had got there, but placed her on a large rough boulder, behind which was the trunk of a great old thorn-tree, affording some support to her back, and he felt with one hand in his pocket for his flask, while he held her up with the other.

But before he had got the flask, she had recovered

from the momentary powerlessness—it was not a faint—which had overtaken her. She opened her eyes just as William, in a hoarse and terrified whisper, inquired—

‘Is she drowned, sir?’

The youth was standing in a drooping attitude between his mistress’s horse and his own, holding a rein of each, and shivering with fear in every limb. It was on him that Eleanor’s eyes fell as she opened them, and she gave a little convulsive laugh.

‘How queer he looks!’ she said, raising herself, and then stopping, as she saw Michael.

‘There, I thought you were not so very far gone,’ observed the latter with composure, raising himself from his knee and standing over her. ‘It was the cold, and the shock. Not very nice in the middle of the beck, I should fancy, was it?’

‘Oh, horrid!’ said Eleanor, shivering. ‘It is Dr. Langstroth, isn’t it?’

‘It is Dr. Langstroth—yes,’ was the dry reply. ‘You had better drink off this,’ he added, pouring out some of the brandy. ‘Then, if you can get on your horse and ride on at once, you may feel no bad effects.’ He proffered a prosaic flask, in a business-like manner.

Eleanor swallowed the portion presented to her with docility, and stood up.

‘I don’t think I fainted,’ she remarked thoughtfully; ‘but I shall never forget the coldness of that water when my horse plunged into that hole.’

‘I suppose you’re not liable to colds or coughs much?’ asked Michael, with apparent indifference.

‘Oh dear, no! I shall be all right, if I can but wring some of the water from my habit. It is so heavy with it.’

She stood up, feeling quite strong ; and while Michael screwed the top on to his brandy-flask, she raised her soaking riding habit, and wrung out the water as well as she could.

‘It is too bad that you should have been troubled about this,’ she said, suddenly stopping in her operations, as it all at once flashed into her mind that he was waiting there entirely on her account. ‘Is my groom there? William!’

‘Yes, miss!’

‘You should not have ridden away and left me. If you had waited a moment, I should have been all right, and Dr. Langstroth need not have been detained.’

‘Do not scold him,’ said Michael, in a low voice. ‘The poor lad is frightened out of his senses. He thought you were drowned, and wished for medical assistance. His promptitude in calling for it, and getting rid of responsibility——’

‘The responsibility of this insane expedition is mine,’ said Eleanor, shortly, beginning to realise the situation. ‘But, indeed, Dr. Langstroth, do not let me keep you here in the cold. We cannot miss the road again, and I am ashamed to have troubled you so much.’

‘Do not be distressed on my account,’ said Michael, calmly. He had restored the flask to his pocket, and now he picked up the gauntlets which she had pulled off and thrown to the ground, and stood watching her, in the ever-deepening twilight, in silence, for some little time after he had spoken. He felt something unreal and dreamlike in the whole situation—in the shadowy woman’s figure, with its quick, graceful, movements ; in the surrounding dark, the rushing stream, the sharp night air. Eleanor said nothing to him, for she felt

somewhat embarrassed. She did not wish to trouble him, but when she thought of that five miles of a ride to Bradstane, in the dark, with no guide but William, her courage did not exactly rise. She would have felt very well satisfied to be ordered by a competent authority to hold her tongue and do as she was bidden, and it was this, in effect, which Michael did tell her when he next spoke.

‘Here are your gloves’—he saw she had wrung her habit as well as she could, and he had noted, even in the dusk, the beautiful curves and strong, flexible power of her white hands and wrists—‘there are your gloves; and when you have put them on, the sooner we move forward again, the better for you.’

‘Yes, I am sure of that. I should very soon be chilled to the bone again, if I stood here,’ she said, drawing on her gloves, and feeling a little thrill of pleased excitement and wonder. ‘This is the second time he has come to my help,’ she informed herself, with accurate recollection of the former circumstance.

‘Now shall I help you?’ said Michael, in his coldest, most civil tone, as William led up the horse. He held his hand for her foot, and in a moment she was in her saddle, remarking—

‘Now I shall be not a bit the worse.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Michael, instinctively speaking with greater dryness and curtness as he began to feel a sense of pleasure and interest in the adventure and the heroine of it. He liked her hardihood; hardy she was, for he knew pretty well that she could not be feeling very warm or comfortable, under the circumstances; and the sousing with cold water, and the shock and danger of the accident would have been, as he well knew, ex-

cuse enough for hysteria and nervous attacks, in nine cases out of ten. She was evidently no friend to such demonstrations. He mounted his own horse, and they started, William falling behind, thankfully enough.

‘We shall go as far as the end of this lane together?’ said Eleanor tentatively; ‘but you must not let me take you farther out of your way.’

‘My way is where I choose or need to go,’ replied Michael carelessly. ‘I see your groom has dropped behind, but if you will allow me, I will just tell him to ride on as fast as he can—even he cannot now very well miss the way. He must see your maid, and tell her to have lots of dry things ready for you, and some hot tea or coffee; and then, perhaps, you may escape without harm. Otherwise, I would not answer for consequences.’

‘But——’

‘Oh, of course I will ride home with you,’ he answered to her unspoken objection. ‘It will be all right.’

Eleanor’s high spirit failed to come to her aid.

‘Thorsgarth is so much out of your way,’ she said, in a low tone.

‘Not when I choose to go there. Wait a moment,’ he answered; and stopping, he called the groom up, gave him his directions succinctly, and bade him ride on. William touched his hat, spurred on, and was soon out of sight in the glimmering, shadowy light.

Eleanor heaved a deep, if silent sigh. She had not given way under the shock of her plunge into the cold water, nor, except physically, and for a moment, afterwards; but now something laid a strange oppression over her heart. Michael was very polite to her; he neglected not a thing which could help her, even to this forethought about acquainting her maid with what had

happened. She had thought about him more than once during the last fortnight ; had heard of him a great deal oftener than once, chiefly from Mrs. Parker, the old doctor's sister, with whom she had become acquainted, and from many others. All she had heard had prepossessed her in his favour, but now that she was with him, actually in his presence, and as it were under his guidance, for the time, she felt afraid of him—felt a strange and painful constraint ; was nervous, timid, tongue-tied. Woman-like, she had the story of his slighted love and his other wrongs, very large and very much present in her mind ; and she credited him with having them before himself in just the same proportion. Then, too, his tone was curt, if civil. It did not invite to anything like friendly and familiar intercourse.

'Civil, civil,' repeated Eleanor in her own mind. 'Yes, indeed, "civil as an orange," and—oh, if he would but speak !'

He did, exactly at that moment.

'I have ridden over this road for ten years,' he remarked, 'and I may have met an acquaintance on it, perhaps, three or four times, and the hounds now and then. How came you to be here ?'

'I don't know myself how I got on to this road,' said she, laughing a little nervously. 'But I know what I intended to do when I set out.' And then she related to him the scheme of exploration which had taken possession of her mind.

Michael was diverted at the idea of any one setting off on such an expedition with no better guide than her recollections of the ordnance map, and a groom who did not know any of the cross roads.

'Barlow, our butler, warned me against the expedi-

tion,' she added, when Michael had once or twice laughed at her explanations. 'But I would not listen to him. And I only told him about Catcastle. I did not mention either of the other places.'

'No wonder he warned you,' said Michael, silently noting, however, with approval, her independence of spirit. 'Why, Catcastle alone is an excursion for a summer's afternoon and evening. . . . And well worth the time it is,' he added, half to himself. 'But Deepdale! You evidently have not the faintest idea what kind of a place it is. It's one of old Drayton's "Helbecks," eerie enough at the best of times, utterly impossible in weather like this. I suppose it was its "slender rill," which attracted your fancy?'

'Yes, it was, because it was

' "Last and least, but loveliest still."'

'Ha, ha! Yes—

' "Romantic Deepdale's slender rill."

It will be roaring away at the bottom of the chasm, just now, in a manner a good deal more vigorous than romantic.'

'Well, I think it is very disappointing. I set off intending to see three places, and I have not seen even one.'

'But have got a good drenching in cold water instead. Don't you think you might take it as an omen?' said Michael, mockingly still, for he was determined not to allow himself to be interested in her; quite resolved not to yield to the pleasure of giving his full appreciation to the music of the round, fresh young voice, with its soft, southern accent, and unmistakable sincerity of tone.

Michael was more of a connoisseur now, than he once had been, in such items. And as for the wonder which had just arisen in his mind—‘what is the charm about her?’—that he felt was a problem which it was quite outside of his province to consider.

‘As an omen!’ she repeated, sweetly. ‘Perhaps I might if I chose. I don’t know that I care much about the drenching.’

Michael scarcely heard her. He was thinking that he could not even call to-morrow upon her, to ask her how she did. Not that he was afraid of Thorsgarth, or of Otho; but simply because he had no part or lot in the Askam clan. He was separated from them for ever, by circumstances which could never—no, never be bridged over. Nothing could ever make it possible for him to have anything to do with them. And this girl by whose side he was now riding was Otho’s sister, and the present mistress of Thorsgarth.

‘I mean to see the places some other day,’ her voice continued; ‘and the drenching does not alter the fact that Barlow is an old man who potters about the house, and is rather slow about his work, and that I am a young woman, accustomed to take long rides.’

‘Alone, and in a rough country like this, no doubt.’

‘N—no. I must say I have never before ridden alone in a country like this.’

‘Well,’ said Michael, indifferently, and more for something to say than for any feeling he had about it, ‘it was not a safe expedition, and I rather wonder that your brother allowed it.’

‘Oh, I know perfectly well that Otho would not allow it, so I seized upon the opportunity while he was away.’

‘Ah, he is away?’

‘Yes. He has gone to some place called Friarsdale. I don’t know where that is. Can you tell me?’

‘Easily. It is over beyond Swaledale and Wensleydale; a good way off, and very out of the way; but, of course, that makes it all the better fitted for your brother’s purpose. It is a good place for the stables, and capital exercise for the——’

‘Stables!’ echoed she, quickly. ‘Has Otho got stables there?’

‘The training stables, I mean. He has some splendid yearlings there. You should get him to take you over to see them—if you care for horses, that is.’

‘But, Mr. Langstroth, you do not mean to tell me that Otho has anything to do with racing—my brother? Oh, well, I have heard that he took an interest in “the turf,” as they call it; but in a racing stable—impossible!’

Michael suppressed a ‘whew!’ of sheer astonishment. The natural reply to the question, and the one which he would have made to any man, would have been to laugh, and say, ‘Oh, hasn’t he, though?’ But he remembered himself in time, and, after a moment’s pause, said, ‘Oh, didn’t you know? I thought every one was acquainted with that fact. It is certainly no secret; only I rather think you are mixing up two things. Your brother’s place is not what one would call a “racing stable”—that is, it is not a place where they train race-horses. They breed horses there for racers, and sell them. It is a purely business kind of thing. I’m surprised you have not happened to hear of it, because his stables are very well known, though, it’s true, not perhaps in your world, up to now.’

‘But,’ said Eleanor, anxiously, her mind apparently fixed on one point, ‘he doesn’t race with them, does he?’

‘With the horses?’ said Michael, laughing, in spite of himself. ‘He has not run one of his own, so far; but I believe he intends to at the next Derby, and some people say that Crackpot will be the favourite.’

‘Crackpot—is that the horse’s name?’ asked Eleanor, in the tone with which one speaks of some extremely ugly and repulsive thing, so that Michael again smiled to himself in the dark.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He’s called after a waterfall in Swaledale, noted for its swiftness.’

Eleanor did not smile at the joke, if joke it were.

‘It seems,’ thought Michael, ‘that I have opened her eyes in an unexpected manner—by accident. Who was to suppose that she could be so exceedingly simple as never to gather what he was after in Friarsdale? If she’s going to take that so much to heart, I am afraid there will be some other rather unpleasant surprises in store for her.’

At this point she broke in again, in a voice which betrayed her uneasiness.

‘You speak as if you did not think much of it, Mr. Langstroth; but, surely, that sort of thing is not for gentlemen.’

‘My dear Miss Askam, you have got quite a wrong impression, I assure you. You must know that some very fine gentlemen have to do with such things. The only thing is, it is such a frightfully expensive hobby, and——’

‘It’s a low kind of amusement, I think,’ she began.

‘Not at all—at least, not of necessity. You must excuse me for contradicting you; but——’

‘Well, if he keeps this place to get money, why not turn horse-dealer at once?’ said Eleanor, resentfully.

Michael felt that extreme innocence can, and does ask more awkward questions, in perfect good faith, than the most hardened wickedness could possibly devise. If he had spoken the truth aloud, he would have been obliged to say that the fact of being a horse-dealer by profession could scarcely be considered a reproach to a man, whatever ignorant young ladies might think on the subject; but that in Otho Askam's neck-or-nothing way of carrying on what he was pleased to call his 'business,' there was matter for reproach, and that, as a matter of fact, a respectable horse-dealer had the pull over the master of Thorsgarth, as regarded character. But he could not say this to Miss Askam, who evidently considered the matter in another light—as a low pursuit, namely,—one, perhaps, of other low pursuits which her brother was in the habit of following. It let a new light into his mind as to her character and her ignorance, and he followed a natural impulse—the impulse to reassure her.

'You really think quite too much about it,' he said, lightly. 'Every true Yorkshire man—and every true border-man, for that matter—has a strain of the jockey in him. And when a man lives in the country, and has his soul in country pursuits it is inevitable that horses should come into the list.'

'That horses should come into the list!' repeated Eleanor, in the same tone of mortification. 'How many more things come into the list of country pursuits? "Running factories," that is one—buying shares: he told me that his friend, Mr. Langstroth, kept him from plunging too deep into that.' She had forgotten who was with her; and as she uttered the next words, a flash of lurid, hideous light seemed to burn the meaning

of it all into her brain. 'Card-parties——' Her breath failed her for a moment. Michael never forgot the voice with which she suddenly asked him, with desperate, urgent haste, 'Mr. Langstroth, for God's sake—is Otho a gambler?'

Michael hesitated for one moment. But he knew he could not shirk the question. So asked, it must be answered truly, however cruel the blow.

'I'm sorry you have asked me that question,' said he. 'But there is only one answer to it. He is a born gambler.'

He awaited her next words with an eagerness and anxiety which surprised himself, and when no words came, he was again surprised at the feeling of chill regret which came over him. For Eleanor made no answer whatever to his answer to her question. The vibrating eagerness of her voice, of the voice with which she had asked if Otho were a gambler, was stilled. In the darkness, which was now deep, they rode on in drear, unbroken silence. What she felt, what she thought, she did not betray. She was not made of the stuff that wails and laments over the discovery that life is not a track of smooth grass, warmed by unclouded sunshine.

'Well,' said Michael to himself, as this silence grew more and more oppressive to him; 'she asked the question. I had to speak the truth. She must have learnt it sooner or later. I can't imagine how it is she has not found it out already. . . .' Then an intense, eager wish. 'If she would only speak! How she must hate me! Yes, she must hate me for telling her that. How can she help? I expect she is wishing now that she had never seen me. It's a pity for her that she

should have come up here, to be thrown into the midst of such doings. Otho for her brother, Magdalen for her friend, and my brother—well, for *l'ami de la maison* ! A nice company for her to be in. . . . And, after all, what is it to me ? Only it's a piece of cursed ill-luck that I should have got mixed up with her at all. . . . I wish she would speak.'

But Eleanor did not speak for what seemed a very long time, except when Michael, who felt the silence absolutely unbearable, said to her once, in a curt tone, to cover his unhappiness, 'Don't you think we had better trot along this road ? You will get cold if we go too slowly.' To which she replied in a measured voice, 'Yes, no doubt,' and at once put her horse into a trot, but made no further remark.

This state of things continued until, having made considerable progress, they were going up the hill towards the old bridge, and had about twenty minutes more of a ride before them. Just as they had reached the bridge and got into the light, they met Roger Camm striding out of the town. He gazed with visible astonishment at Michael and his companion, raised his hat, and passed on. Then Eleanor spoke, quite quietly and composedly.

'Is not that your friend, Mr. Camm ?'

'Yes,' said Michael, with a profound sense of relief. 'But, if I may ask, how do you know he is my friend, and what do you know of him ?'

'I heard about him when Otho took me to see Miss Wynter. And Miss Dixon was there too——'

'When was that ?' asked Michael.

'Why, the day after I came to Thorsgarth. You were there when we called. Don't you remember ?'

‘I remember that occasion perfectly; but it is a fortnight ago.’

‘Well, I have never been since.’ Michael raised his eyebrows. She had never been since! ‘Miss Dixon came before we left,’ went on Eleanor. ‘She said Mr. Camm was going out to fetch her home. Miss Wynter told me you and he were great friends.’

‘Yes, Roger and I have knocked about together a good deal. We know the best and the worst of each other, I fancy; and if you can stick together after that it means that you are friends.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. He looks—he has an original-looking face. Is he clever?’

‘Yes, he is very clever. He has a career before him—at least——’

‘At least?’

‘I believe I was going to say he would have, if he were not engaged to Ada Dixon; but I don’t see that she need hinder him so much, after all.’

‘I do not know Mr. Camm, of course; but I should not imagine she was his equal, if he is really a clever and able man.’

‘I fear you are right. But Roger has crotchets, and one of them is, that he is a working man. In a way, he is, as we all are, or ought to be; but his father was a clergyman of the Church of England. He is never going to be anything else, according to his own theory; and working men, from what he says, must marry in their own sphere, or else they will always be in a false position, and “getting into lumber,” as he calls it.’

‘Well, there may be a good deal in that; but from what I saw of Miss Dixon that afternoon, I should think she was the last person to be a suitable wife for a real

working man. She seemed to feel herself quite outside anything of that kind.'

'Of course. She is outside anything of that kind, practically. But Roger wants to marry her, and, of course, theories are elastic, under certain circumstances. I suppose he was going out to Balder Hall now, to fetch her home.'

'Yes,' said Eleanor, and they did not pursue the topic. They were now very near Thorsgarth; a few minutes more brought them to its gates, and as they rode up the avenue, Eleanor suddenly said, in an extinguished voice—

'How *tired* I am! I never was so tired in my life before.'

He was silent. They stopped before the door, over which burned a light. Eleanor's hands dropped on her lap, as she sat still and tired out. Michael dismounted and came to her to lift her from her horse.

'Won't you ring?' said she; 'then they will send the men round, and save you any more trouble.'

'Let me do my own way,' said he, lifting her down. For a moment, just one moment, he held her in his arms, and as the light fell upon her, he thought he had never seen so sad and proud an expression on any woman's face. Something rose in his throat for a moment. Then, just as he turned to put his hand on the bell, she said—

'Stop one moment. I am very tired, and cannot talk to-night; but there is something that I must speak to you about. Yes, I must,' she added, almost vehemently. 'All the way I have been thinking of it; I can never rest till I have asked you about it. Will you call to-morrow afternoon? Would you very much mind? I will not keep you long.'

‘I will call,’ said he, after a very brief pause. ‘At what hour?’

‘Shall we say four? I think you are exceedingly good. I—I cannot thank you.’

‘No, you have nothing to thank me for,’ said Michael drily, as he pulled the bell. ‘But since you are pleased to feel grateful to me for something or other, prove it by not thinking or fretting too much about—what we were speaking of,’ and he looked meaningly at her. He could not speak so indifferently as he would have wished to. He knew, with unerring certainty, that she had not a careless nature, but a deep one—not a nature that lives on the surface. He had pained her; that thought, though unreasonable, was persistently present in his mind. She smiled rather wanly in answer to his exhortation.

‘I will do what I can,’ she said.

‘I wish you had never asked *me* that question,’ said Michael, and his voice betrayed his disturbance.

‘Let me repeat your own advice—do not think too much about it,’ said she, turning as the door was opened.

Barlow stood there uttering an exclamation of joy. Eleanor held out her hand to Michael, and said in a very distinct voice—

‘I thank you for your escort. And you will do me the favour to call to-morrow afternoon?’

‘I shall do so,’ said he, and stood with his hat in his hand till the door was closed behind her. Then he turned, to find William in possession of his mistress’s horse, and inquiring anxiously if she was likely to be any the worse.

‘I hope not,’ said Michael, getting on to his own horse again. ‘But listen to me, my lad. When Miss Askam thinks of riding long distances ’cross country,

and you don't know the way, another time let me advise you to tell her so, and not get into such a mess again.'

He rode away, leaving William speechless between concern at what had happened and desperate puzzlement as to how he was possibly to refuse to obey his mistress's orders.

'I isn't here to tell her what she ought to do,' reflected the youth. 'I'se here to do what she tells me. How be I to do both? Perhaps you could'—with a nod after the vanishing figure,—'but I'se different from you.'

CHAPTER XX

HOW A THORN WAS PLANTED

‘Look here, Michael, if you ever mean to sit still again, I should be awfully glad if you would begin to do it now, if it’s quite the same to you. A man whirring about the room, and crumpling up newspapers without ever reading them is not the best sort of help in working out calculations.’

‘I’m sure I beg your pardon. I was really lost in thought.’

‘Humph! Pretty noisy kind of thoughts,’ said Roger, bending again over the sheet which had occupied him.

There was perfect silence now for a few moments (the scene was, of course, the library at the Red Gables), too perfect a silence to last very long. Then Michael suddenly burst out in his turn—

‘Are you obliged to finish those wretched calculations to-night? Because, if not, I should like to speak to you.’

Roger threw his pen down.

‘Thankful for an excuse to let them alone,’ said he. ‘What’s up?’

‘I told you how I came to meet Miss Askam this afternoon.’

‘You did.’

'You may be aware that from the Black Bank Ford to Thorsgarth is a good five miles?'

'It is every bit of it. I admit it freely.'

'Perhaps you can also comprehend that we did not ride all that distance in unbroken silence?'

'Rather stupid of you both, if you did, I should say.'

'Yes. Well, we had a good deal of conversation.'

'Ah! Was it of an agreeable nature?'

'It was interesting, at any rate.'

'That was well. I am yearning to hear more. What did you talk about?'

'Scenery, amongst other things.'

'Yes? Has she an eye for the picturesque?'

'A taste for it, I should say, seeing the kind of expedition she had undertaken, and how she came to be where I found her.'

'To be sure! I had forgotten that. Well?'

Michael paused, and Roger looked at him. He had spoken flippantly, but he had not been altogether delighted to find how full his friend was of the afternoon's adventure.

'She talked about her brother,' said Michael, slowly.

'To you! Well——'

'Wait a bit! It came on quite accidentally. The whole thing was accidental, and I don't know that I am not very sorry to have got let in for it at all. It was apropos of Otho's having gone away from home. She told me he had gone to Friarsdale, and asked me where, exactly, it was. My reply enlightened her considerably. Would you believe that she was perfectly ignorant that he possessed that place in Friarsdale? She was in a great state about it when she gathered, from my casual remark, that he had horses over there.'

‘No wonder, if she has any idea of the value of money, or any conception of the way in which it flies in Friarsdale.’

‘Bah! She knows nothing about that, of course. She had an idea that everything of that kind must be low. I tried to make things straight, but she had got thinking, and putting two and two together as quick-witted women will; and before I had time to take my breath, almost, she had hit upon the exact truth, turned upon me, and demanded to know if Otho were a gambler.’

‘How intensely disagreeable for you!’

‘Humph! Not very pleasant for her, when I had to say yes to her question. She did not speak for an immense time. It seemed an eternity to me. I began to wish myself well out of it.’

‘Well, you are well out of it now,’ said Roger, looking at him from under his bushy brows. But he spoke with some uncertainty.

‘No, I’m not, unless I break a promise I made her.’

Roger was too entirely in sympathy with Michael and his every mood to express surprise, but, well though he knew his friend, he felt it. Michael must, he understood at once, have been very much moved, to have made promises to Eleanor Askam.

‘What sort of a promise was that, Michael?’ he asked, quietly.

‘When we parted at her door, I lifted her from her horse, and she looked so utterly sad and heartbroken, that I could hardly bear to see her. She asked me to call upon her to-morrow afternoon, as she had something to say to me, and I—said I would.’

Silence again. Roger pondered the situation, and at last said—

‘I suppose, if you made a promise of that sort, you must keep it.’

‘I must, I think. I’m only under the impression that I was an awful fool ever *to* make it.’

‘I don’t see why. It commits you to nothing.’

‘Oh, nothing, of course,’ said Michael, quickly. ‘I’m sorry for her, that’s all. And I hate to see a woman in trouble.’

‘She may have got over her trouble by the time you get there.’

‘She’ll never get over it, if you mean that she may have begun not to care about her brother’s weaknesses, or vices—whichever you please to call them.’

‘Does she expect you to help her in curing them?’ asked Roger, rather bitterly.

‘I don’t know what she wants,’ said Michael curtly. ‘I thought I’d tell you about it, that was all. It’s all right.’

With that he seemed to consider the subject at an end. Roger knew quite well that what Michael meant was, that he repented him bitterly of his incautious promise to set foot again within Thorsgarth, and that in speaking about it, he had had one lingering wish that Roger might say, ‘Don’t go. Say you can’t, or won’t.’ But Roger had not been able to say that, and if he had, Michael would not have been able to act upon it. The thing was settled. He was to go.

All the following day he went about his business and his work, seemingly just as usual. But behind all his occupations he had constantly before his mind’s eye the scene of the previous evening—a sepia-tinted landscape, a picture all in neutral hues, behind whose grayness he could feel a warmth and a glow which thrilled him.

He saw again the darkling sky and fields, heard the roaring of the swollen Balder, and then the measured clank of their horses' hoofs through the streets and along the frosty roads. And when this recollection faded for a time, it was replaced by that of their parting—the tired voice, the earnest request, the promised, 'I will not keep you long,' the sweet burden held for one moment in his arms, and the door closed between them when she went in.

'Pooh! What folly. I shall not give way to any such nonsense. Otho Askam—Otho is her brother. Magdalen—Gilbert—what part or lot have I with them? She has some crotchet in her head. I would not be unkind to her, but I will make no more promises. I shall give her to understand that.'

It was a powerful and an honest resolution, and came from the very depths of Michael's convictions on the subject of his own relations with these persons who had once, years ago, played so important a part in his life.

Directly after four o'clock, he found himself walking up the Thorsgarth avenue, and, as he went, he could not but remember, mistily at first, how he and those three other boys had once made that now so mournful aisle ring with their shouts of mirth and delight. 'The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,' and as he walked on and emerged in the open space before the house, the dimness vanished, and there came, glowing and sunshiny as at the time, athwart all the frost and grayness of the present, the vivid recollection of those summer days, when he had seen this same girl on whom he was now going to call, led by her nurse's hand, or by that of the proud young beauty, her mother, pacing the terraces, and he, a boy of twelve, had lain upon the river-bank,

and dreamed his dreams, lulled half to sleep by the warmth of the sunshine and the murmur of the stream.

Then, almost before he had adjusted his mind to this recollection it seemed, he heard his name announced to her and stood before her, in a sombre room on the ground-floor—the library.

Eleanor, who was pale and tired, as he saw when he entered, rose from a chair by the fire, and offered him her hand, a slow, deep blush spreading itself over her whole face. But she betrayed no embarrassment of speech or manner. She looked grave, sad, composed.

‘It is kind of you to come, just because I asked you,’ said she, as they both sat down.

‘There is no kindness in that,’ said Michael, beginning to measure his words, in pursuance of his resolution. ‘You said you wished to speak to me, or to ask me something—I forget which,—and of course I came. Equally of course, you may find me the most ignorant or silent of men, before I leave you.’

‘I know you are not ignorant on the points as to which I wish for information. But you may very easily choose to be silent,’ answered Eleanor.

‘First of all, let me ask how you are to-day? How did you sustain the shock of the cold water yesterday afternoon?’

‘I have taken no cold, thank you. In fact, when I had got my wet things off, and had become warm by the fire, I was so utterly worn out that I couldn’t sit up any longer, and ignominiously went to bed.’

‘And to sleep, I hope?’

‘Well—I won’t boast of having slept much; but that was not because of the plunge into the Balder Beck. . . . Mr. Langstroth, I am not going to make apologies

or say I am sure you must be surprised at my asking you to call upon me to-day, or anything of that kind. I think you can believe I am trying to act for the best.'

'I am sure you are,' said he, briefly and coldly.

'Yes. Therefore, no apologies are needed ; but perhaps a word of explanation is. You know I am almost a stranger here?'

'Yes.'

'But of course you do not know that my brother is as much a stranger to me and my friends as I am to him and his.'

'I did not know it—but——'

'You did not know it. But it is so. What you told me last night, in answer to my question,'—she hastened to add, as he looked up quickly—'you could not help it, it was not your fault, but it distressed me dreadfully. I thought about it all night. I felt that I was groping in the dark, with no one and nothing to guide me. There is no one here from whom I can ask a question—not one. I want to know if you will answer me one or two.'

'It will depend upon what they are,' he replied in the same curt, dry voice.

'Yes, of course. First of all—ah, I cannot go on in this way, cataloguing things,' exclaimed Eleanor, passionately. 'It is too horrible. I don't believe I have the right to ask one of these questions ; and yet I feel as if so much depended on my knowing the answers to them !'

She had sat up, and leaned forward, looking with intense earnestness, pleading earnestness at him. Michael, imperceptibly to her, caught his breath. The temptation was strong to bid her ask what she would, since he knew

her motives must be pure. As a matter of fact, he looked at her steadily, gravely, and attentively, awaiting what more she had to say. He said no words to help or lead her on.

‘I will tell you what I want to know,’ she said. ‘Does Miss Wynter know about Otho—about what he does with his money—his gambling? Does he want to marry her? and would it be good for him if he did marry her?’

Having asked her questions, Eleanor sat, with her face aflame, and looked at him, every trace of her first self-possession having vanished. As he did not immediately answer, she went on hurriedly—

‘I asked Miss Wynter if she knew about Otho’s character and habits. I asked her partly in joke and to tease her, because I saw she hated me to take any interest in him; but she told me that if she knew everything about him to the most minute particular, she would not think of sharing her knowledge with me.’ Then, seeing Michael’s lips grow tight and his eyebrows draw together, she added, ‘That is why I know it is useless to ask her.’

‘It would be absurd to refuse to answer that question,’ said Michael, almost contemptuously. ‘Every one in Bradstane knows that Miss Wynter and your brother are friends—intimate friends, and that she knows more about him than any one else, except——’ He paused, with a look of deep distaste on his face.

‘I know, I know,’ said Eleanor, quickly.

‘Therefore that is no secret. As for your other questions—I must decline to make any kind of an answer to them. I cannot imagine any circumstances under which I would discuss those points.’

‘It is perfectly natural that you should feel so,’ said Eleanor, every spark of spirit gone from her voice and attitude, as she sat, leaning rather droopingly forward, despondency on her face, and her fingers loosely twined together. She looked towards the ground after that remark, and was silent, giving a deep sigh after a while.

Michael could not help looking at her as she sat thus, having evidently almost forgotten his presence. In contemplating her he was vividly aware of her beauty, and of the noble order to which it belonged ; but he was still more keenly alive to something else—to the deep sadness which overspread her whole countenance and attitude. He was sure, from her whole appearance, and from what his experienced eye knew to be her temperament, that she was well-formed for the enjoyment of pleasure. But not, it would seem, to the exclusion of other things. It was quite evident that since the discovery she had made with regard to Otho, she had not had much delight in existence, or even found much relief in looking forward to a better time. Michael could understand and appreciate this kind of disposition ; in a woman, he had grown greatly to admire it. Eleanor, as she sat now, disappointed, puzzled, unhappy, seemingly wondering what she was to do for the best, appealed very strongly to the emotional side of his nature, which had been dormant for years now—ever since he had taken his life and career into his own hands again, after the great shock they had once sustained. But he was no longer a boy, or even a very impetuous man,—at least, not the man any more to let his impetuses run away with him. There was no possible justification for the questions which Eleanor had asked him. He was not going to answer them—was not going for one moment to enter into any discussion on

those points. But while his reason told him how wrong she had been in asking the questions, his heart forgave her freely the indiscretion. She had asked him—because she felt she could trust him. He liked the bold frankness and unconventionality of the action. Magdalen had ever loved the strictest observance of outside form—unless there had been some advantage to be gained by disregarding it. At this moment Eleanor looked up, and met his eyes dwelling steadily on her face. She blushed deeply.

‘I have to beg your pardon,’ said she, ‘for having brought you here on such a fruitless errand. I might have known—I did know, in my inmost heart—that you could not, and would not answer those questions. But I felt so at sea in the matter. I had such a need of guidance.’

Michael rose, smiling slightly.

‘Do not apologise,’ said he; ‘we all do impetuous things sometimes. You, at least, were actuated by no bad motives.’

‘No,’ she said, in a low voice, as she, too, rose.

Then Michael, in his turn, gave way to a sudden impulse.

‘Because I cannot speak to you on these subjects,’ said he, ‘that is no reason why you should not ask some one else; it is no reason why you should not know what you wish to know. For my part, I think you are quite right in seeking to learn the truth on these matters.’

‘But there is no one else,’ said Eleanor. ‘You and Miss Wynter are the only——’

‘You are quite mistaken,’ he interrupted her gravely. ‘What you say shows that you are, indeed, a stranger to your brother and his associates. He has one friend who

knows him more intimately and has more influence over him than even Miss Wynter, and that one is——'

'Your brother,' Eleanor almost whispered, again rushing to the right conclusion, and saving Michael the pain of finishing his sentence.

'Yes,' he answered, gravely. 'It is he whom I mean. And as I believe he comes here often——'

'He is coming down for Christmas, Otho told me,' she interposed eagerly.

'Ask him what you wish to know,' said Michael, a hardness coming into his tone which was peculiar to him in speaking of Gilbert. 'He can have no reasons for concealing anything from you, and can tell you all you have asked me, and as much more as you wish to know—that is, if he chooses.'

'Thank you,' said Eleanor unenthusiastically. 'I will remember what you say.'

'Then I will wish you good afternoon,' said Michael, holding out his hand. Eleanor put hers within it silently. 'Miss Askam,' he said, quickly, 'do not, I say again, make too much of this trouble. Do not battle too hard with it, if you know what I mean. I expect that to you, who have very likely never known a cross, in the real sense of the word, it seems something to be resented bitterly, but——'

'No, you are quite mistaken,' said Eleanor, quickly but softly, lifting her eyes to his face with a steady look in them that struck him very much. 'I see that it is something I shall have to live with. There is no use in resenting a trouble of that kind. When I came here, I came looking for joy. I have found sorrow. I found it the very day after I got here, though I hardly knew what it was, then. I understand now. I shall not rebel against it.'

‘That is right,’ he could not help exclaiming heartily, in a very different tone of voice from any which she had yet heard from his lips. And he gave her hand a pressure and a little quick shake. ‘Forgive me if I take the freedom of saying to you, that from the first time I saw you I thought you were made of the right stuff.’

‘Did you?’ she said, smiling involuntarily, and with a queer look adding, ‘I don’t mean to make fun of serious things, but it always did seem to me that people made, as you say, of the right stuff, meant those who were chosen out to bear a lot of trouble, because their backs were broader or stronger than those of their neighbours.’

‘That is one view of the case, certainly,’ said Michael, going to the door. ‘Good day!’

And he walked out, having a final impression of her, standing with her hands folded before her, and looking after him with an expression, half anxiety, half relief, on her face.

‘A fine girl!’ said he to himself, as he walked very slowly down the avenue: he did not feel, now, in such a desperate hurry to shake the dust of the place from his feet. ‘What a blending of fire and softness, of vigour and gentleness! No weak-willed fool would have spoken in that way. It was not a spiritless acquiescence in evil because she really had no power to cope with it. It is that she understands something of what is below the surface. She has found out the best way to meet it. “I came here looking for joy. I have found sorrow.” How noble she did look as she said it! Well, may she find strength too, to carry her sorrow wisely and well. It is the best any of us can ask for in this world.’

But he pondered the theme in every variety of aspect on his homeward way. He wondered what she would do after he had left her—how pass the dreary evening, alone and uncheered, in the great, desolate house. At this idea Michael suddenly felt a wave of exceeding great pity and compunction sweep over his soul. Well might she say, 'I have found sorrow.' What else could one, nurtured as she had been, look for, in that house and its associations? He suddenly became conscious how very bad it was for a young woman to sit alone and brood over troubles—bad for both mental and bodily health. And he fell to wondering who, in all the social circles of Bradstane and its neighbourhood could in some way play the part to her of friend or associate.

Of course, what he pictured her as doing was entirely different from what she really did. After he had left the room, she stood looking at the door which had closed after him, and listened to his footsteps for the few short moments during which it was possible to hear them. Then, suddenly, with a quick, restless movement she began to pace the room. Backwards and forwards she went, with an uneasy step, for some time, till, in the gathering dark, Barlow came in with a lamp, and with a taper lighted some candles which stood on the mantelpiece. He soon went away again, and the illumination he had made would have revealed her to any one who had happened to be there, with a face pallid but excited, and a strange unusual light in her eyes. She made a pause in her walk, moved uncertainly once or twice, and then walked up to the mantelpiece. She was not now thinking of the ill news and the trouble which had, as it were, stalked into her life, but of him through whom, indirectly, she had become acquainted with them. What

did it all mean? and herself of two days ago, where was it? Was it laughter or tears now struggling within her—pleasure or pain? Something had happened to her, that she felt, and she would always be different from what she had been before. Had she been lifted up, or struck down? She could not tell, she had not the faintest idea, but she felt Michael's voice thrilling again through every nerve, till at last the sensation of the mastery he had gotten over her became almost unbearable. If he had thus laid her under a spell which she felt to be almost terrible in its strength and intensity, what of herself? She was not yet so lost in her own subjective sensations as to be unable to take his into consideration, and at this moment she suddenly lifted her eyes and looked at her own reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece—her lips parted, and a new searching eagerness in her expression.

'He saw my face this afternoon, clearly enough,' something within her seemed to say, with an uncontrollable frankness, for which her usual self was in no wise accountable. It was as if a voice apart, and yet belonging to her, spoke, and she had to listen. Some phase of her own nature which had never yet addressed itself to her, appealed to her now, crying aloud, so that other voices were stilled; it made itself imperiously audible.

'He saw it. Did it please him, I wonder? What did he think of it? What does he think of me? I would give all the world, if I had it, to know.'

But the reflection of herself which she saw, only flung her own doubt and wonder and groping speculation back into her own face, and presently she sat down again, muttering, 'I wish I had never seen him.'

Then, at last, the wished-for tears broke forth, and she whispered to herself between them, 'He is good, he is good, he is good! I know he is.'

Good or bad, he had that day planted a thorn in her breast, and it grew apace.

CHAPTER XXI

WORK AND WAGES

THREE weeks of unmitigated, solid, hard work followed in Michael's life upon these two eventful afternoons—not work of a kind to make him forget whatever transient gleam of a different world might have crossed his path. It was not the art that can make poverty rich, and turn prose into poetry; it was not the science which can possess and absorb and fascinate a man, and charm him away from outside influences, so as to be a formidable rival to even a well-loved human being. It was none of that, but one continual, mechanical grind amongst prosaic and often sordid surroundings, accomplished without excitement or glamour, at the expense of considerable physical wear and tear and weariness. After such a day's work as this, he would come in to his home and his friend. If he was not too tired, there was always plenty to occupy his time in the shape of reading, connected with his profession; very often more visits to pay during the evening; very occasionally a dinner-party at some house in the neighbourhood, where he met the same people he had been meeting ever since he had begun to go to local dinner-parties, and heard the same topics discussed that always were discussed in Bradstane. His nearest approach to a social and domestic evening

was when he, being very tired, would indulge himself in the luxury of a sofa and a pipe, and Roger, putting away his books, would sit down to the piano and play, or sing, or improvise for an hour or two for his benefit. During moments of frivolity and relaxation like these, he often caught himself thinking of Eleanor Askam, as she thanked him, in her sweet tired voice, for his escort, or stood before him with steadfast gaze, saying, 'I came looking for joy. I have found sorrow.' They were both situations in such sharp contrast with the rest of his existence, that it can scarcely be matter for surprise if he dwelt upon them rather often in recollection. He did not, however, think of them as anything more than passing incidents, to which it was pleasant to revert in memory; not as epochs or turning-points in his mental or emotional condition. During these weeks it happened that he never once met Eleanor, or perhaps his eyes might have had the scales lifted from them. He heard of her sometimes, as was natural. And one day, at a house where he was lunching, some girls were discussing her and her claims to beauty. They agreed that these claims were quite undeniable; they admired her exceedingly. She was very original-looking, as well as beautiful, and yet not in the least odd.

Repressing a smile, and exercising what measure he possessed of the wisdom of the serpent, Michael opened his ears that they might, if possible, gather in the reasons for this magnanimous and universal admission. He presently learned that Miss Askam, though so handsome, and not a bit dull or stupid, was rather quiet, went out very little, and had said she did not think of visiting much during the winter.

‘Then she won’t be at any of the balls?’ asked a practical spirit.

‘I suppose not, from that. But I don’t know, of course. She didn’t say she had vowed never to go out at all. But it must be very trying for her. *He* won’t go anywhere, you know; and she is evidently not the sort of young woman who goes in for society and amusement at any price.’

‘No; and I must say I admire her for it. Mamma said she thought her quite dignified and proper in her ideas—very good form in every way. It’s very sad for her, having a brother like that, and no one to take her out. I think we’re going to ask her to lunch, some day.’

‘Ah, yes!’ came in a chorus of satisfied assent.

Michael hereupon took his leave. The girls had forgotten his presence, and, on his appearance amongst them, eagerly asked if he knew Miss Askam.

‘I’ve met her casually, once or twice,’ said Michael, calmly. ‘So far as I can judge, your verdict upon her is full of wisdom and justice.’ And he bowed himself out.

‘Michael Langstroth does get more and more dull and unsatisfactory as a companion every time one sees him,’ observed a young matron, who had known him since they had both been children. ‘He’s a disappointed man, that’s what he is,’ she added with decision. ‘He will go on getting worse and worse in that way.’

Michael, riding away, thought also how fortunate it was for Miss Askam that she was ‘dignified;’ though it certainly seemed as if the dignity must bring with it a good deal of dulness, when practised in a place like Bradstane.

But these thoughts of her, and talk of her, even such as that he had just heard, were occasional, rare; while

his work was daily, hourly, and continual, and the pursuit of it carried him quickly through the last days of November, and the first week or two of December, till it did not want so very long to Christmas.

It was 'an open winter,' that year. At least, December was well advanced, and there had been hardly a touch of frost. The roads were soft, and the air was mild, so that it was not only Michael who was to be seen riding up and down at this season. He met friends occasionally, and exchanged greetings with them, at long distances from their homes.

One morning, riding in a road some three or four miles from Bradstane, he was walking his horse, and looking with curiosity at some bushes in the hedge, on which were visible many buds. The trees had mistaken the warmth of autumn for that of spring; no doubt they would presently be rudely reminded of their error, blighted, and turned into vegetable misanthropes, while the little unseasonable black buds would die an untimely death.

Slowly turning a corner, he came full upon what seemed to him, at first, quite a cavalcade of horsemen and horsewomen. A moment's glance, however, showed that the party consisted of four—two ladies, and two men, with a couple of grooms in the background. The lane was not wide, and they rode two and two.

Those in front, whom he saw and recognised first, were Magdalen and Otho Askam. Magdalen was a little flushed; she looked even handsomer than usual, and decidedly more animated. But, as she suddenly recognised Michael, a change passed over her face—a rapid, subtle look of unease, a trouble, a stirring of the depths below. It was the look which she never could quite

repress when she met him, especially if Otho Askam were present, and it was a look which always renewed to Michael the assurance that, in the combat between them, it was he who had conquered her, not she him. Otho frowned as they met; Magdalen averted her eyes as she bowed. It was their way of acknowledging the wrong they had done him. It was wrung from them every time they encountered him. They passed on, and then the next riders came full into Michael's view.

In an instant he felt chilled, disconcerted, and angered, too, with an anger that hurt and pained him. His mind was filled at once with wild, incoherent fears and ideas. It was Eleanor Askam whose gaze first met his, looking very grave, and as it seemed to him very sweet, and rather sad. The clear eyes dilated, and a quick flush came into her face as she saw him. He saw that look, and knew it as an acknowledgment of what had already passed between them. That sight of her, and that look of hers could only have given him pleasure. It was when he recognised her companion that his heart sank so heavily. Gilbert's gaze had not wavered as Magdalen's did, when he encountered that of Michael. He had grown into the sort of man, outwardly considered, that he might have been expected to develop into. He was not in the least handsome, but had an air of distinction, an individuality in his whole appearance which went far beyond good looks. He was perfectly dressed. He was a perfect horseman—his city life had not broken him of that familiar habitude of his youth and young manhood,—and he looked every inch like a gentleman and a man of the world. When Michael took off his hat, so did Gilbert, with unruffled composure. It was Michael's turn to be troubled and distressed beyond all reason.

Long after they had passed each other he rode on with his feelings in a state of the utmost perturbation, a thousand wild thoughts tormenting his soul.

The chief one was that he himself had advised Eleanor, so to speak, to make a friend of Gilbert—to confide her troubles to him, and ask his advice. What had he been dreaming of? Had he been fool enough to identify her feelings with his own, and be confident that she would have no intercourse with Gilbert beyond what was absolutely necessary? What earthly right or reason had he had for assuming such a thing? A ludicrous feeling of injured vanity came across him as, in a kind of parenthesis, he recollected Gilbert's appearance; the high finish and perfection of every appointment, from his hat to his boots, and then contrasted with it all his own rather rough-and-ready accoutrements—the clothing and paraphernalia of the poor country doctor who must be out at all hours and in all weather, no matter what betide. A deep, dark flush crossed Michael's face. It was the first time such a contrast had ever crossed his mind. Now he thought, 'What does it matter how he came by it all? She will not inquire into that, and he is the sort of man she has been accustomed to. And we always like what we are accustomed to, no matter how we may pretend to relish a change.' His poverty and want of power to make the appearance of other young men, no better born nor bred than himself, galled him, for the very first time, deep in his heart of hearts.

Then other considerations came rushing into his mind. She had looked grave, it was true; but what of that? Hers might be one of those deep natures to which happiness gives a grave expression. And, grave or not, she had been riding by Gilbert's side; she had apparently

been conversing with him on friendly terms; there had been no expression of displeasure or dislike upon her face.

And on what other terms could she possibly have been with him? he asked himself. And what had she to do with his quarrels? 'I must be going off my head!' said Michael to himself, lifting off his hat, to let the air cool his forehead. After all, he realised, when he had had a little time in which to let his ideas adjust themselves, the fear which had seized upon his innermost soul and dismayed it was, not lest Eleanor should be attracted by Gilbert, but lest Gilbert should be attracted by Eleanor. That which caused him to be dismayed by this prospect was the knowledge that if such a thing were to happen—if Gilbert should love her, and be pleased to tell her so, and to make any claim for her, he had a great deal of power. He literally held her brother's fortunes in the hollow of his hand. If he could not altogether repair the ravages Otho had made in his estate, he could finish the matter at his pleasure, and make a complete ruin of what as yet was but a badly damaged property. If it should ever come to pass that he wished to marry Eleanor, and she should not wish to marry him, he could make her life miserable to her, if he chose, through the injuries which he could inflict upon her brother. And, then, supposing she should care for him! Michael found himself breathing harder and riding faster as this possibility entered his mind, but he forced himself to face it. Should she ever 'care for' Gilbert, there was nothing to prevent, but everything to urge a marriage between them. And after all, why should she not care for him? She had been far away, and all unwitting the circumstances,

when Gilbert's sin had been committed ; and if he had sinned basely and blackly, once, he had by his sin got what he aimed at ; he had bought with it the means and the power to be honest for all the rest of his life. Not every one, reflected Michael, could boast so much.

Thoughts like these did not form a soothing accompaniment to his ride. He angrily asked himself what it was to him, supposing she and Gilbert chose to be married next week ? He had no answer to that, but only the consciousness that it would be a great deal to him ; unhappiness which he preferred not to contemplate. Reason told him that his thoughts were extravagant and exaggerated—that he had imagined without a cause the extremest possibilities of a given (imaginary) situation. Something else, though, importunately said that though they might be extreme possibilities, yet that they distinctly were possibilities.

He set his teeth, and told himself in effect, if not in so many words, that he was not 'going to be made a fool of again by that set.' And if, by some unaccountable means, Eleanor Askam had become an object of so much importance in his mind, the best thing to do now would be to be hard, and root her out at once ;—hard to himself, of course—not to her.

He had an opportunity that very evening of, so to speak, trying the effect of a scourge upon his own flesh. Dr. Rowntree presented himself after dinner for a chat. This, as a rule, meant that they all three gossiped as hard, or harder than if they had been so many spinsters of the same ages and standing. This evening, from the nature of the subject, which soon became apparent, Roger and the old doctor did the gossiping with avidity ; and Michael seized the opportunity, without taking them

into his confidence, to use the scourge upon himself. They sat in the library, and after a few preliminary remarks, Dr. Rowntree uttered the words which he had come for the express purpose of uttering—

‘I was at Johnson’s last night,’ said he.

‘Johnson’ was the vicar of Bradstane—a toil-worn man, with a very exceeding numerous progeny.

‘Were you?’ said Michael; ‘and how are they going on? I haven’t been there for ages.’

‘No, they said it was long since they had seen you. I think they are all flourishing. Effie looks a great deal better. Your absence does not seem to have damaged you in her estimation *yet*.’

‘*Yet*—why the extreme emphasis upon that word?’ asked Michael, in surprise. ‘I don’t expect ever to be damaged in Effie’s estimation. And I told Mrs. Johnson that the treatment would have to be persevered in some time before any good effects could be expected, so I thought my absence would be accounted for.’

‘Oh, I’m not meaning that,’ said the doctor mysteriously. ‘Mrs. Johnson is not the woman to shirk a direction of that kind. You may be sure that if you told her the treatment needed perseverance, it would get it from her. It has had it, and with good results. Poor little weakling! She may out-grow it all yet, though; and I will say that I don’t know a kinder and a gentler family, parents and children and all, than the Johnsons, anywhere.’

‘Yes, they are a very nice lot of children,’ said Michael, who was tracing out the details of the Battle of Bull Run on a map, and who spoke absently. ‘Very nice children, and I must go and see them soon. But I have been so busy.’

'You had better go, if you don't want your nose putting out of joint,' said the doctor. 'They are in a state of excitement at having found a new friend—a formidable rival to you, I can tell you, my lad.'

'Whoever it may be,' said Michael, his finger on the line of the Shenandoah Valley railroad, 'I will stake all I am worth on Effie's fidelity.'

'Well, Effie—of course she's infatuated about you. Perhaps the camp might even divide,—Effie and the rest of the girls on your side, and the boys on that of the new person. Guess who it is.'

Michael, who had given his undivided attention to this last remark, knew in an instant. He had no need to guess. Not feeling inclined to rouse the curiosity of the other two, however, he merely shook his head, and apparently returned to the study of his map. It was at this juncture that the scourge came into requisition. He was silent, he knew he should not take much part in the rest of the conversation. Roger, who was also, to some extent, a friend of the little Johnsons, now inquired with interest who the 'new person' was.

'Well, you'd never guess, if you tried for a week,' said the innocent old gentleman, beaming triumphantly upon them through his spectacles; 'so I may as well tell you. It is Miss Askam of Thorsgarth—Otho's sister.'

'Of course it was,' thought Michael; and he was conscious that Roger in expressing his own astonishment, shot a quick glance at him, Michael. He managed to conjure up a look which, accompanied by raised eyebrows, and a murmured 'dear me!' formed a very fair imitation of surprise. He envied Roger's unaffected interest and astonishment.

'I have such a thorough contempt for all that lot,'

went on Dr. Rowntree, 'that if I had known Miss Askam was going to be there last night, nothing would have induced me to go. I've had many lessons on the folly of being prejudiced and pig-headed, but I believe I am occasionally a little inclined that way—eh, what?'

He looked sharply at Roger, who merely laughed and said, 'Go on. When are you coming to Miss Askam?'

'Well, at once. I turned in unexpectedly, about half-past seven, last night. I wanted to see Mrs. Johnson about my Christmas-tree. You know the children always have a Christmas-tree at my house. I was shown into the sitting-room, and there I found them. Mrs. Johnson was actually sitting by the fire, reading—would you believe it?—reading a novel. And Miss Askam was at the table playing "commerce" with *all* of them. There wasn't one left out. And they had candies for a pool. I was so astounded that I hardly knew what to make of it, and stood there looking quite foolish. However, I was presented to the lady, and she invited me to join the game; but of course I had come on other business.'

He paused. Roger did not vex Michael by looking at him. But he instinctively understood that Michael did not wish to take any part in this conversation. He therefore said, 'Well?'

'Well, Mrs. Johnson and I had a little conversation—about the Christmas-tree, of course—in another room. Naturally, she mentioned Miss Askam, and how they had become acquainted. She says Miss Askam is an angel, and that she has done more than any one else to reconcile her to her position here—of the poor lady struggling amongst rich acquaintances, without a real friend in the lot.'

It was well known by Mrs. Johnson's intimate friends, and by these three men amongst them, that she had never felt happy or at home with the well-born and wealthy sheep of her husband's flock—those sheep who stood in every worldly consideration so very high above their shepherd. Her poverty, her many children, and her many cares had always prevented her from visiting them on terms of anything like equality; while her own upbringing as a gentlewoman, made their patronage, however good-natured, very galling to her. And, perhaps, none of them had ever been so careworn themselves or so troubled as to be able to approach her as a friend. It was, at least, whosoever the fault might be, a certain thing that Mrs. Johnson did not 'get on' with her richer neighbours, and that many of them considered her unbending, unreasonable, and disagreeable. There was probably ground for both opinions. Her brusqueness and utter unwillingness to receive any kind of favours annoyed them, while to have them step from their carriages into her shabby house, and coldly behold the bareness of the domestic territory, exasperated and humiliated her at the same time. Perhaps, as a matter of fact, their hearts were better than their manners; certainly, this was the case with Mrs. Johnson herself; but neither of them could see the good in the other side.

'Miss Askam didn't patronise her, then?' said Roger.

'Well, no, or you may be sure she would not have been sitting in the midst of them in that fashion. It seems Johnson insisted that his wife should call upon Miss Askam soon after she came. He said Otho's goings on were nothing to them, and they had no right to assume that Miss Askam would be anything but de-

lighted to receive the wife of her parish priest. So Mrs. Johnson put on her best gown and went, sorely against her will, having made up her mind to find a female edition of Otho. You may judge of her relief at what she did find.'

'I don't see how we can be expected to enter into the fulness of Mrs. Johnson's joy, seeing that we don't know Miss Askam. And why she should have assumed that——'

'Botheration to you and your assumptions! Will you let me tell my own tale in my own way, and don't be a prig. Mrs. Johnson found, as she said, a simple, unassuming young lady, as unpretentious as if she had lived in a four-roomed cottage. She seemed downright glad to see Mrs. Johnson, and made her have tea, and asked her about the children; and, above all, she didn't offer to send her home in the carriage.' (Roger gave vent to a short, sardonic laugh. He had a powerful, insane objection to Ada's being 'sent home in the carriage' from Balder Hall.) 'But she did put on her things and walk half the way home with her. She asked if she might go and see the children. Of course Mrs. Johnson gave a few particulars about their establishment, which seems to me to have been highly unnecessary——'

'Very,' echoed Roger. 'Why can't people stand on their own legs, *as* their own legs, and not be always deprecating the fact that they are not just the same shape as the legs of other people? Well!'

'It was not long before Miss Askam presented herself, at an hour when they were all in, and in five minutes she'd made friends with every one of them, from the biggest to the least. So now she's a friend of the

family, and her name a household word, like yours, Mike.'

'Isn't it rather odd that she should chum so with the Johnsons?' asked Roger, going fully into the question.

'No, I don't think so. I think she finds it congenial. She's always welcome, and she knows it. And there's another thing,—she is a woman of the right sort.'

'What on earth do you mean by that?' asked Roger, while Michael sat silent.

'Well, it would take a good while to explain all I mean by that. But when you come across such a woman, you know her quickly for what she is, or I'm sorry for you if you don't; you ain't up to much. The right sort of woman, when she has griefs and sorrows of her own—and that young thing has, unless her sad eyes are very misleading—does not seek her distractions where the wrong sort of woman does. I don't mean that she shuts herself up like a nun—that's no good; but she does seem to fly to charity, by which I don't mean carrying round tracts and soup-tickets; she flies to charity, I say, as a duck takes to water. I don't know that she is always so anxious to *forget* her troubles—the right sort of woman. You can't forget a constant pain; you couldn't forget chronic neuralgia if you had that blessing given you; but she does find a right use for them—the use they were intended for by Him who sent them to her,' said the little doctor, lowering his voice; 'and she best alleviates her own griefs by helping others out of theirs. I'm convinced that Miss Askam is such a woman. She's sad—very sad—she is, for all her riches and all her beauty; and—Michael, what must you be rattling that blind down for, just when I'm talking?

It's your own garden outside. You can't be overlooked, if that is what you are afraid of.'

'I beg your pardon. Well, what next?' said Michael, with an immense effort, sitting down again, and trying to look tranquil. One would almost have said that the worthy doctor's eulogiums bored him.

'I daresay you are right,' said Roger. 'Anyhow, if she finds a need for friends of that sort, to whom she can be a help, I am glad she has found out the Johnsons; for they can do with a few, "of the right sort," as you say.'

'I can't tell you how much I liked her,' said Dr. Rowntree, beaming contentedly. 'There was only one thing that Mrs. Johnson said, that went a little against the grain with me.'

'While you were settling about the Christmas-tree, I suppose?' said Roger, politely.

'That man from London, saving your presence, Michael, is staying at Thorsgarth now. He called with her one morning when she came to the Vicarage——'

'Oh, come!' said Roger, hastily, 'Mrs. Johnson is well known to be a match-maker.'

'Well,' said the doctor, a little abashed, 'we'll hope that that idea is nothing but imagination, of course.'

'It may be, or it may not be so,' here observed Michael, joining in the conversation for the first time, and using his scourge upon himself out of sheer perversity of spirit. 'But I should say if it is, imagination has got a better handle to lay hold of than it usually has, in Bradstane.'

'Why—do you know anything? Have you heard anything?' both the others inquired, turning upon him with greedy eagerness.

‘Nothing in the world,’ said Michael, coldly, ‘except what my own senses tell me. I met them all out riding this morning—Askam and Magdalen; Miss Askam and Gilbert. I immediately thought of that possibility, for some reason—and thought it a very likely one too.’

‘It is not likely she would favour him,’ said Dr. Rowntree, with an angry sniff, ‘however he might like her.’

Michael shrugged his shoulders. For some reason, unknown to himself, he felt impelled to combat the doctor—try to dispel the *couleur de rose* in which he saw all that he liked or loved.

‘No one can even hazard a guess on such a subject,’ said he; ‘but if he “liked” her, as you express it, things might be made very unpleasant for her, if she didn’t see her way to liking him in return.’

‘Ah—ow!’ gasped Dr. Rowntree, as this possibility flashed across his mind. ‘I knew she had her troubles,’ he concluded, darkly.

Roger burst out laughing. Michael said not another word. It sometimes happened that he had occasion, as now, to mention Gilbert’s name, in the course of conversation, when it always fell from his lips as calmly and coldly as if it had been the name of some one unknown.

‘I suppose,’ said Roger, ‘that she will be at *the* concert?’

‘Oh yes. She has promised them to go to that. It was raining last night when her carriage came for her, and she begged to set me down at my house. So I went with her, and had a little conversation with her. She insists upon joining at my Christmas-tree. She says she knows of a lot of things the children want which

their mother would never tell me of—and I who thought she told me everything! And then she said, ‘Fancy their faces, you know, when they every one find two presents instead of only one. It will be worth anything, just to look at them.’ And she laughed at the idea. So she is to call upon my sister to-morrow, and they will settle it all between them. But you’ll be at my house at the party, of course, and then you can see and judge for yourselves.’

Neither of the young men said anything to this, and Dr. Rowntree, expressing an opinion that he had tarried long enough, got up from his chair, and took his departure.

There was silence for a little while, and then Roger said, ‘What an old enthusiast he is when he takes a fancy to any one.’

‘Yes, he is,’ said Michael, coldly, as he, too, rose. ‘I have to go out again, so I had better lose no more time.’

‘Out again, Michael! Are you sure?’

‘I’m not very likely to make a mistake about it,’ said the young man, smiling slightly, as he glanced over his list.

‘Well, I do call it too bad, after such a day as you have had. Anybody is better off than a doctor,’ grumbled Roger.

Michael went out, merely remarking that it was all in the day’s work.

It was late before he returned, and during his absence Roger had time to reflect upon the matters they had been discussing earlier.

‘It touched up Michael in some disagreeable way—what the old man said,’ he decided. ‘I wonder what it could be. Surely he has not got a fancy for that girl!’

What a cursed complication that would be, to be sure ! But I'm sure he hasn't, or if he had, he has will enough to crush it out, quickly. He would never yield to it. What a voice that was in which he spoke of meeting them ! . . . Sometimes I wonder if he ever has any self-reproach when he meets Gilbert on these auspicious occasions. Not likely, I should think. Michael is a good man ; and when a good man—a really good man, like him—feels that he has a right to be hard, by George ! he does use it with a vengeance. I don't think it would ever occur to him that Gilbert could have anything to say for himself. And I do fondly hope he has no "feelings" on the subject of this astonishing Miss Askam. It would be too horrible if anything like that were to happen.'

CHAPTER XXII

CROSS-PURPOSES

A FEW days after this, the subject of the above discussion, the 'astonishing Miss Askam,' the new friend of the Johnson family, and the object of Dr. Rowntree's fervent admiration, returning from a morning visit to the Vicarage, and making her way home by way of the 'Castle-walk,' as it was called, found herself a little tired ; and as it was a mild and sunshiny day, she seated herself upon a wooden bench which was situated just under the ruin of the great tower, and rested herself, while she watched the flow of Tees, turbid with the late rains, far below her feet.

While she sat there, some one, humming a tune, came round the corner, and Eleanor, glancing at her, beheld the showily dressed little figure of Ada Dixon. Ada had seen Eleanor, too, and she hesitated perceptibly in her walk, a look of expectation and curiosity upon her face.

'Good morning,' said Eleanor cheerfully, and did not intend to say any more ; but Ada stopped, now that she had a faint excuse for doing so. Eleanor then remembered what had seemed to her the rude treatment bestowed upon the young girl by Otho and Magdalen, on the occasion of her well-remembered visit to Balder

Hall, and she decided that a little courtesy might not be out of place here.

‘Good morning, Miss Askam,’ Ada replied, her eyes roving anxiously over all the details of the other’s costume. ‘How do you do? I hope you are very well,’ she added, deciding within her own mind that Miss Askam ‘dressed very plain and dark, and all one colour—just a plain, dark brown. I do like a little brightness.’

‘I am very well, thank you,’ said Eleanor, utterly unconscious of this scrutiny. ‘Have you been to Miss Wynter’s again lately?’

‘Yes, Miss Askam. I go there pretty often. Once or twice a week, at any rate. Miss Wynter and I are great friends.’

‘Oh. And how are your songs getting on? Those which you are preparing for the concert, I mean!’

‘Oh, thank you, very well. I’m almost perfect in them now.’

‘Perhaps you would like to sit down. I felt tired; it is such a mild morning,’ said Eleanor, making room on the bench.

Ada promptly sat down.

‘I was feeling a little tired,’ she replied, with an air of languor; ‘really, the weather is not at all seasonable.’

‘No; but do you like frost? I do; but you don’t look to me as if you could stand much of that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, I’m not particularly delicate, thank you—never very strong, but I always keep going, somehow,’ said Ada. ‘I haven’t seen you at Balder Hall, lately,’ she added, to Eleanor’s great astonishment.

‘That is not surprising, as I have not been there since the day I saw you,’ she answered, indifferently.

‘Are you going to sing that same song at the concert?’ she added.

‘No, not that one. I take part in a duet with Miss Wynter.’

‘I see. Not so trying, quite, as having to stand up alone. I saw you were a little nervous that afternoon; but one soon gets over that when one has once started.’

‘Oh, thank you, there’s no call to pity me,’ said Ada, with a lofty smile. ‘I’m accustomed to singing before gentlemen.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean that exactly,’ said Eleanor, astounded to find the construction put upon her words. ‘What a queer little self-sufficient, ill-bred thing it is!’ she reflected to herself. ‘How sad that Mr. Camm should be so blind!’ For she had heard a great deal about Roger Camm at the Vicarage, and from the doctor, whom she had seen once or twice in the last few days.

‘It did not matter in the least,’ went on Ada, anxious to vindicate herself from the charge of nervousness. ‘When one has to sing in public, it would never do to get nervous before one’s friends.’

‘Well, no,’ Eleanor admitted, secretly more and more surprised and amused. ‘Is she like this by nature, or has Miss Wynter petted her till she has got such ideas into her head?’ Meantime, Ada, secretly much elated, wished very much that some one would come by and see her seated side by side with Miss Askam, who, it was evident, was quite pleased to see her. She was accustomed to be treated very differently by Magdalen, who talked to her as if she had been a child, snubbed her, and sent her running to fetch and carry, while she encouraged her to come, and said she could not do without her. Magdalen, as Ada knew, valued her at no very

high figure; Miss Askam, she fancied, mistook her for a lady. For poor Ada, with all her vanity, was so keenly conscious of not being a lady, so well aware that something was wanting to make her into one—a really fashionable milliner, probably, or a course of visiting amongst stylish people. So she behaved now with a perkish flippancy, intended to show that she was as well aware of her own claims to distinction as any one else could be, which, indeed, was very emphatically the case.

Ada had a book in her hand, or rather a paper number of a newspaper or journal.

‘Were you reading as you took your walk?’ asked Eleanor.

‘Yes, I was,’ and she displayed the title-page of the periodical, with a sensational engraving on it, and the title, *Genteel Journal*.

‘Oh dear!’ Eleanor could not help saying; ‘are you fond of reading?’

‘Very, some sorts of reading. I like the stories in the *Genteel Journal*, and the poetry too. Have you read “The Earl’s Caprice”?’

‘No,’ said Eleanor, much interested, and wondering what further developments the conversation would take. ‘Is that a story?’

‘Yes, indeed, a most delightful one. It is running now in the *Journal*, and leaves off at such an exciting part. They always do.’

‘Who is the author?’

‘Miss Laura Loveday. Don’t you think her stories are very pretty?’

‘I’m afraid I am very ignorant, for I never heard of her before.’

‘You do surprise me. There’s lovely poetry in this

paper too. Augustus Sprout writes a good deal for it. You will know his poetry, I daresay.'

'I must plead guilty to having never heard of either him or his poems.'

'Dear me, how odd! The *Genteel Journal* published a sketch of his life a little while ago. It was like a novel to read it.'

'Since you are so fond of stories, of course you are acquainted with the classics amongst our novelists,—Thackeray, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, and all the other great names?'

'Classics!' cried Ada, not answering the question. 'Oh, I know what classics are. Roger—Mr. Camm, that is, you know—is always telling me I should read this and that and the other, because they are classics. I know I never tried a classic yet that wasn't awfully dry—yes, awfully.'

'Perhaps you haven't ever really tried.'

'Oh yes, I have. He does like such very dry books. I lent him one of Laura Loveday's novels, one day—not the "Earl's Caprice," but another, "The Fate of the Falconers," it was called. It is such a pretty story, all about how a very old family were saved from ruin by the eldest son's clandestine marriage with quite a poor, obscure girl, but very beautiful, of course. Well, Roger brought it back very soon, and said it was worse than silly, it was nasty—fancy, accusing me of reading nasty things, Miss Askam! And he wondered how I could pollute my mind with such stuff.'

'Well?' said Eleanor, with deep interest.

'And he wanted me to promise never to read any more of Laura Loveday's novels. Just fancy!'

'And I am sure you did promise,' said Eleanor, gently.

‘Not I, indeed!’ retorted Ada, tossing her head; and then, seeing that Miss Askam’s eyes were fixed very gravely upon her, she reddened, and added, with some confusion—

‘Well, there, I did promise. He was so very urgent about it.’

‘I thought you would. I am sure Mr. Camm was quite right. And I am sure you will be all the better for not reading any more of Miss Loveday’s novels. Even if you read nothing else, it would be better not to read them.’

Ada fumbled for some little time with a massive silver watch-chain, and then said slowly—

‘Miss Askam, don’t you be shocked, but I have read some more of them—two of them. I did not tell Roger, because I knew he’d never ask me. He doesn’t really care about it, you know; it’s only that he hasn’t a head for stories, and that sort of thing; and he thinks every one else can care for the same dry things that he likes. I did try to read Macaulay’s “History,” but it was no use. What do I care for such things—things that happened hundreds and thousands of years ago——’ She saw a startled expression upon her auditor’s face, and went on: ‘There, I see I’m all wrong; but I did hate it so, that I can’t even remember what it was about, nor when it all happened. I can’t read such books, and that’s all about it; and yet, something I must have to read.’

‘Oh, I am so sorry that you did read those two other books!’ exclaimed Eleanor, earnestly.

And Ada Dixon thought how very odd she was, and not anything like as nice as Miss Wynter. Miss Wynter always encouraged her to talk about the novels of Laura

Loveday, or about the poems of Augustus Sprout, or, indeed, about anything and everything that came into her head. Remembering this, and feeling that it was impossible for any one to know better about things than Miss Wynter, she took courage, and said—

‘Well, but, Miss Askam, I don’t see that Roger has a right to dictate things of that kind to me, especially when I’m not interested in the things that interest him. Miss Wynter always asks me all about the novels, and poetry, and things, and she says it amuses her immensely to hear about them.’

‘I daresay it does,’ said Eleanor, in a tone of such strong and unguarded displeasure, that Ada immediately thought, ‘She’s jealous of Miss Wynter for something. Ma said she was.’

‘But,’ Eleanor pursued, ‘you had not been dictated to. I understand that you promised Mr. Camm——’

‘Well, I did ; but——’

‘But you should not have broken your promise. Please do excuse my saying it. I daresay I have no business to, but I feel so much interested in you and Mr. Camm. I have heard so much about him, and I think he must be so remarkably clever and interesting——’

‘Do you ! exclaimed Ada, in unaffected astonishment. Well, I never !

‘I feel perfectly certain that he is very clever, and that some day he will make a mark in the world. I’m sure there is no doubt about that. You should be very proud to have won the love of such a man, for I am sure that you will have reason to be proud to be his wife, some day.’

‘Eh, Miss Askam !’

Ada was, as she would have said herself, 'taken aback' by Miss Askam's earnestness, and especially by the bold way in which she prophesied great things, and that, too, before the event. It had never occurred to her to look at it in that light before. Her father always said how steady and 'decent' Roger was ; that meant, she knew, that he was expected always to have an income and a comfortable home for her, Ada. But her mother looked down upon him ; and she herself, though she had been pleased and flattered with his attentions at first, and was aware that many another girl in Bradstane would have lent no unwilling ear to his courting, had lately begun to see the possibility of a future, far more highly coloured and richly gilded than any that Roger Camm had to offer her ; a future more like the state of things depicted in 'The Fate of the Falconers,' in which the heir of an ancient and lordly house, handsome, picturesque, with the manners of a prince, and the sins of a Corsair upon his soul, became enslaved by the charms of a young girl, her own age, and, so far as she had gathered from the description, very much resembling herself in personal appearance. A secret marriage had followed ; a little romantic adversity, in which lovers and flattery, and old castles and devoted retainers, of whom, she thought, old Barlow at Thorsgarth might stand as a very fair specimen, had never been missing. These romantic adjuncts had never been wanting in the story ; and then came the gradual working-round, which in the end left the lovely Adela a countess, with crowds of servants, jewels, a box at the opera, and all London raving about her beauty. That—or something as near it as circumstances allowed—was the life for her, thought Ada. That was the sphere she had been born to grace ;

and the rapture of feeling that for her sake a man would give up his evil ways, was infinitely beyond any prosaic union with one who was not distinguished by having evil ways to give up. But here Miss Askam's voice again disturbed her.

'Yes, I am quite sure of it,' she said, in the same straightforward, earnest way. 'I think you ought to be very proud that he has chosen you ; and as for giving up reading things which he disapproves of, you surely cannot hesitate about that. You must know that he is very clever, and has had a great deal more experience than you have.'

'Oh yes.' Ada was quite ready to own that. It was what she was quite sure of. The only thing was, she was not sure that cleverness and experience, like Roger's, made their owners altogether more agreeable. At any rate, they became oppressive when frequently used to point out to her her shortcomings. That was not her idea of the functions of a lover ; it was not the way in which the heroes in Laura Loveday's novels behaved. Those gentlemen had eyes of fire and lips of flame ; they always managed to appear suddenly by moonlight, and the scenery in which they moved always happened to be of a picturesque kind,—balconies and verandahs forming a great feature in every landscape. They never alluded to Macaulay's 'History ;' and while Roger had once told her how glad he was that she had discarded her chignon, which he went so far as to characterise as a 'nasty lump,' Miss Loveday's heroes were in the habit of pushing back the tresses from their mistress's brows, and murmuring words of adoration in her ears. Yet here was Miss Askam telling her she ought to be proud to be loved by this fault-finding man ; perhaps she ought to be proud

even of being found fault with. She would ask; and she did.

‘But, Miss Askam, Roger is always picking holes in what I do. It isn’t in books alone, but about everything, and always—at least, very often. I suppose I ought to be proud of that, too, since he’s so very clever, you say.’

‘You say!’ Eleanor perceived from these words that she had wasted her breath, and privately felt that it served her right for ever entering into such a discussion. But Ada was looking at her with intense earnestness, and Eleanor asked, ‘Do you really wish me to give you my opinion on such a subject?’

‘Indeed, I wish you would.’

‘Well, in a way, I think you ought to be proud to be even found fault with by him. He would not do it if he did not care very much for you, and also feel sure that you had it in you to grow into something higher and better.

‘Well, I don’t know. Roger was satisfied enough when I said I would have him,’ said Ada, discontentedly.

‘But,’ said Eleanor, the slow, deep blush coming over her face, and hesitating as she spoke, ‘if you love him very much, as of course you do——?’

‘I—oh yes, I’m very fond of him, of course,’ said Ada, unwillingly.

‘Then you won’t be satisfied with yourself, I should think, but will want to rise higher and become better and better, so as to be more worthy of him.’

‘Worthy of him!’ echoed Ada, offended. ‘I’m as good as he is. He’s not the only one I could have had. No, and I needn’t be sitting in the dust to keep him. If it was all off to-morrow I could have another next week.’

‘Could you, indeed?’ said Eleanor, coldly. ‘I think we probably don’t agree upon the matter, and had better not say any more about it. You asked my opinion, or I certainly should not have spoken to you on such a subject.’

She rose, and seeing Ada’s flushed and discomfited look, could not continue vexed with her.

‘I am sorry if I have annoyed you,’ she said, frankly, and smiling her bright smile. She offered Ada her hand, adding, still with a smile, ‘You must forgive me, and don’t let Mr. Camm know that you have been getting lectures from some one else. I expect he prefers to keep a monopoly of them.’

Ada could not rise to the occasion. She shook hands rather sheepishly, muttered something about it ‘not mattering,’ and the two separated.

After lunch, late in the afternoon, and when it was growing dusk, Eleanor was sitting in the library. She had found that when she did this, Otho, especially now that he had a friend with him, would sometimes stroll in towards evening and sit for an hour. This afternoon he did so, followed by Gilbert. They had been shooting, said they were thirsty, and craved for tea, which she gave them.

If Eleanor looked grave in these days, the gravity was partly caused by the fact that she could not reconcile the Gilbert Langstroth of whom she had heard so much, and from so many persons, with the Gilbert Langstroth who was Otho’s guest, and her own frequent companion. She naturally abhorred what she had heard of him; she had received him with cold civility, and was in every way disposed to keep him at a distance and cherish exalted thoughts of his brother. But she

had found it impossible. Strongly biassed though she was against Gilbert, and for Michael, she could not succeed in finding Gilbert detestable. Reason as she would, she could not make herself find him personally disagreeable, or be bored, vexed, or harassed by his company. He had great power, she had had to confess—power to make himself welcome, looked for, agreeable, his opinion valuable, and his influence desired; while his marvellous command over Otho called forth her gratitude, and forced her into an attitude of half-cordial, half-reluctant civility to him and respect for him. It was the effort to reconcile this Gilbert Langstroth who had suddenly appeared in her life, with the Gilbert Langstroth of years ago, of whom and of whose treachery one uniform story was everywhere told, that helped to make her grave, and gave a shade of embarrassment to her manner towards him.

CHAPTER XXIII

QUARREL

THE evening of the Bradstane concert at last arrived. It was two days before Christmas that this great event usually took place,—an event spoken of by Mrs. Johnson as though it had been a solemn feast, with an appointed date in the Church's year ; and it formed almost the most trying of the many trying occasions which chequered her earthly career. This season, thanks to the valuable assistance of Miss Askam in the dreary business known as 'decorating,' Mrs. Johnson felt her difficulties much lightened, and looked forward to the evening's entertainment with a kind of 'rest-and-be-thankful' feeling, rare indeed in her experience.

Eleanor felt less comfort than Mrs. Johnson, in the anticipation of the evening. She hardly knew how it was, or with whom the invitation had originated, whether with Otho, herself, or Magdalen's self—but an invitation had certainly been given to the latter to dine at Thorsgarth, and go with the party from there to the entertainment. 'The party' meant all of them!—Eleanor, Magdalen, Gilbert, and Otho. Eleanor had been unaffectedly astonished when Otho had said he was going. She had promised Mrs. Johnson to be there herself, and did not intend to fail her ; but she had

expected to go alone, call for the doctor's sister, Mrs. Parker, on the way, and under the decent, if not highly distinguished chaperonage of that lady, sit through the concert, and derive from it what enjoyment she might. She had resolved to know nothing about Gilbert and his arrangements, and to ignore Magdalen, except by a bow, and a few words. This new scheme had completely changed the aspect of things. She had had to send a note to Mrs. Parker explaining that, so far from being alone, she would have a party with her, and must remain with them. And then there was the prospect of the concert itself, and of the company of her brother and Gilbert Langstroth, and of Magdalen Wynter, who would, of course, join them as soon as her part in the performance should be over. It was a thoroughly painful prospect to her ; not the less so, in that there was absolutely no excuse for her shirking the ceremony.

She returned to Thorsgarth from the Vicarage, in the afternoon, and presently went upstairs to dress for the evening's entertainment. The most competent authorities had assured her that at these concerts it was the custom for the ladies of the vicinity to go in full dress, or, at any rate, in unmistakable evening dress, in order to do honour to their town and townspeople, and to show that they did not labour under the idea that 'anything would do' for a Bradstane concert. Following out this tradition, Miss Askam had caused her maid to array her in a quaint-looking but handsome gown of velvet and brocade. She knew that dresses of this kind, more splendid than airy, suited her, and wore them by preference to any others.

She stood now before the toilet glass, while her Abigail put the finishing touches to the dress, right

glad to see some of the finery worn once again. It appeared to her that her mistress's beauty, of which she was proud, and her accomplishments, of which she had heard people speak, were utterly and entirely thrown away in a place like this. Eleanor stood a little undecided what ornaments to wear, when her maid was summoned away, and presently returned, bearing in her hand a bouquet, with a card dangling from it.

‘If you please, ma’am, I was to give you this, with Mr. Langstroth’s compliments.’

‘Mr. Langstroth!’ suddenly exclaimed Eleanor, a quick change coming over her face; and then, taking the flowers, she lifted the card and read: ‘With Mr. Gilbert Langstroth’s compliments;’ and just below, ‘Miss Askam wished for some double violets for this evening, which G. L. hopes do not arrive too late to be of use.’

Eleanor had held her breath as she perused these words; she now breathed again, quickly, and said, as she gave his flowers again into her maid’s hand—

‘Put them down, and just twist these pearls through my hair. I shall wear them, I think.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Louisa, and added as she surveyed the flowers—‘They’re really lovely, ma’am. Could Mr. Langstroth have got them in England?’

‘Of course he could. One can get anything by sending to Covent Garden,’ replied her mistress hastily. ‘Pray be quick, Louisa, for I hear that Miss Wynter has come, and is waiting for me.’

Louisa laid the flowers—exquisite double violets, both blue and white, whose delicate perfume had already made itself felt in the warm air of the room—upon a table and obeyed the injunction in silence. Eleanor sat before the glass, with eyes cast down, and feelings in

which vague apprehension and uncertainty were predominant. Gilbert Langstroth had been with them a fortnight—surely not a very long time; but in that fortnight he had succeeded in making her feel that he was a power, and a great one, in everything that concerned her brother's affairs; that if she wished to have any permanent hold upon Otho, she must take Otho's friend, and that friend's will and pleasure into account; that only by cutting herself entirely adrift from Otho could she act or plan without reference to Gilbert. That was surely matter enough for consideration; and, in addition to that, she had begun to feel during the last week, that Gilbert had some idea of being a power in her affairs too. She rebelled against this; she revolted against it, but she trembled, and she literally did not know what course to take. The appearance of the violets now only added to her embarrassment.

She was roused by Louisa's voice.

'There, ma'am. These always suit you better than anything else, and they go perfectly with this dress. And I think, if you would let me put a small bunch of the violets here, in front of your dress, instead of any more ornaments——'

'No, certainly not,' said Eleanor, hastily. 'I will not wear them.' Then, seeing a look of surprise at her vehemence, she added, hesitatingly, 'I will carry them in my hand. I—it would be a pity to spoil the bouquet by taking any out of it; it is so beautifully arranged. Am I ready now? I will go down.'

She went into the drawing-room, framing in her mind some kind of apology for being so late. But on entering the room she found that Magdalen was not alone. Otho was there with her. He was standing on

the hearthrug, ready dressed for the evening, with his back against the mantelpiece, and his hands clasped behind him. There was a smile of anything but a genial nature upon his lips, and his eyes were fixed upon Miss Wynter with an expression which struck Eleanor instantly as being unusual, but which she could not quite fathom. Magdalen was reposing in a low chair, with her fan closed in her hands, which were lightly folded one over the other. She was tranquil, calm, unmoved; her marble eyelids a little drooped, and the faintest smile upon her lips. She was looking marvellously handsome, in a black velvet gown, and with scarlet geraniums in her breast and hair.

I am sorry to have been so long in coming, Miss Wynter. I really was kept upstairs; but I see Otho has been with you, so you have not been entirely alone.'

'Perhaps it would have been better if I had,' responded Magdalen nonchalantly, as she rose to shake hands with Eleanor. 'Otho and I have been quarrelling, and when he quarrels no one can be more nasty.'

Eleanor smiled slightly, taking it for a jest, and one in rather doubtful taste; but she was enlightened when Otho, with a scowl significant of anything but jesting, said with something like a snarl in his voice—

'You are right, Magdalen. "Nasty" is the word, and nasty you shall find me, since this is the way you treat me.'

'Really,' said Magdalen, with a taunting little laugh, 'how absurdly you talk! 'Treat you in this way! You are too ridiculous!'

Eleanor stood looking from one to the other. Magdalen was still standing, speaking lightly, in an attitude of careless grace, and with a disdainful little smile upon

her lips ; but it seemed to Eleanor that there was a strained look in her eyes.

‘Have you been really quarrelling?’ she asked, doubtfully. ‘Why, he thinks so much of you.’

‘I did,’ said Otho ; ‘but it’s d—d difficult to go on thinking so much of a woman who carries on as she does. She’s in my house now, and I hope I know what is due to my guests ; but wait till we are out of it, and on neutral ground, that’s all.’

‘Oh, Otho!’ began his sister, shocked. But he had walked sullenly to the door, and opened it. Then he turned and looked towards them again.

‘Remember, Magdalen, you shall pay me with interest for every bit of this night’s work, and that before long.’

‘That will be as I choose,’ she retorted, but her lips had grown thin. Otho was banging out of the room, when Gilbert Langstroth, coming in, caught hold of his arm.

‘Now then, Otho, what is the matter?’

‘Don’t hold me!’ said Otho, looking wrathfully at him. ‘I’m in a bad temper, and you had best let me alone.’

With which he left them, and Gilbert came forward, looking a little seriously at both the young women.

‘Miss Wynter,’ exclaimed Eleanor, ‘what can have happened, and what is to be done?’

‘Oh,’ said Magdalen, ‘pray don’t heed him. He will be all right again before the evening is over.’

Eleanor felt great doubt as to the correctness of that theory, and was annoyed, too, to hear Otho spoken of as if he had been a petted child, who must be humoured, though indeed, as she had to admit to herself, his behaviour gave only too good ground for such treatment.

And despite Magdalen's lofty words, she seemed not able to cast off the constraint left by the late disagreeable scene ; but, picking up the *Spectator*, opened it as wide as it would unfold, and seemed to read it. Eleanor felt her eyes turn involuntarily towards Gilbert ; it was not that she wished to appeal to him, but she was intensely conscious that he alone was capable of giving counsel (if counsel were to be had) in such a situation, and she looked at him, just as one would send for the nearest doctor, if one were attacked by some strange and inexplicable illness. She found his eyes also fixed upon hers, attentively, carefully, and admiringly. She felt with a cold thrill of certainty that what she had suspected and feared was true, and he was now thinking of her, and not of either Magdalen or Otho.

He handed her a chair, and seated himself beside her. His very first words only heightened her uneasiness.

'I hope you did not think me too officious in sending for the violets,' he said in a low voice.

Magdalen lowered her paper, and gave him a look, which he received and returned ; and, with a dark expression on her face, she resumed her ostensible occupation. Perhaps Gilbert knew all about what had passed, and was mocking her futile efforts to appear unconcerned. Magdalen had always felt that Gilbert's sin and hers had had such very unequally meted rewards. He had been so successful after his sin, and she had failed so wretchedly and so tantalisingly after hers.

'Officious—no. They are beautiful flowers,' said Eleanor, uneasily. 'It was very kind to take so much trouble ; for, after all, it was only a whim of mine.'

'You have so few whims, that when one is vouchsafed a hint of one, one is only too glad to gratify it.'

‘Oh, I hope I am not so exacting as to expect such gratifications. . . . I—will Otho—what is Otho doing just now, do you think?’ she added, in a still lower voice, unable to shake off the disagreeable impression she had derived from his look and words.

‘Don’t trouble yourself about Otho,’ rejoined Gilbert, in the same tone, but in a still lower voice. ‘Do not let any thought of him disturb your enjoyment this evening.’

‘Enjoyment; do you suppose I am expecting enjoyment!’ Eleanor had exclaimed almost before she knew what she was saying.

‘If you cannot have it, no one else deserves a grain of it,’ said Gilbert, deliberately. ‘But, really, I wish you would calm your fears. Just let us reason about it. What can Otho possibly do to-night, that can cause you any uneasiness? We shall go straight to the concert-room, and once there, he is safe.’

‘He may not go at all.’

‘Well, if he does not, you will; and why should you allow your mind to be engaged in imagining him doing something disagreeable? Your apprehensions are exaggerated, I assure you. Tell me what you are afraid of.’

‘He said,’ replied Eleanor, almost in a whisper, so that Magdalen could not possibly hear, ‘that he would make her repent, and that before long. I thought he might, perhaps, if he went to-night, say or do something rude—or at dinner—I do not know what he will do when he looks so dangerous.’

Gilbert laughed a low laugh, speaking of amusement and enjoyment too.

‘Otho has other methods of punishing her,’ he said. ‘Do not alarm yourself; I will see to it. And’—he bent

his head close to hers, and her fingers tightened one over the other—‘please excuse the question; but I always see two sides of a thing. Do you mean to tell me that you would be very sorry for her to be punished, a little, if it could be done unobtrusively?’

Gilbert certainly knew what he was about when he asked this question. The eyes that were suddenly lifted towards his own held confession in their glance. She shook her head silently; but the very silence implied that he had guessed aright.

‘I thought you might have whims for other things, as well as double violets,’ said Gilbert, with a slight smile, which made her feel that he was very much stronger than she was, and very much better acquainted with human nature. She was silent; but Gilbert had got an object to gain, and he said, ‘You owe me some little reward for having guessed so correctly. Won’t you tell me what you have done with those flowers?’

‘I—oh, I left them in my room.’

‘There to wither and die, I suppose? Poor things! I have a great weakness for flowers—those flowers, especially. If you dislike them, will you do me the cruel favour to return them? I mean it, really.’

‘But I do not dislike them. I—it—I thought I would carry them in my hand to-night,’ she said, distracted at the extent of the concessions he was wringing from her, but perfectly aware that when he promised to see that Otho behaved himself, and then began instantly to talk about violets, he conveyed a hint which she must accept on pain of his displeasure.

‘You did! I could not possibly wish for more than that,’ he said, and there was triumph, intense, if repressed, in his smile and his tone.

Eleanor could only feel wretched, and wish she were a hundred miles away from Bradstane; all the more fervently when, on looking up, she found that Magdalen had laid the newspaper down, and was looking at her with a mocking smile—the smile of one who, being in difficulties herself, was not sorry to see some one else entangled.

Here the door opened. Otho came in, with Barlow behind him, to announce dinner. The master of the house offered his arm to Miss Wynter, who took it, treating him with what seemed a composed cheerfulness. During the meal, Otho was portentously gentle and polite to every one he addressed. There was no trace in voice or manner of his late anger; only in the sullen glow which still lurked in his eyes. Eleanor, who had acquired the sad habitude of noticing such things, observed that he scarcely touched wine. In his whole demeanour there was a most unusual softness and courtesy. She could not shake off her constraint; the shock of the unbridled fury which she had seen on his face when she had gone into the drawing-room was not to be easily obliterated. Never before had she felt so strongly his likeness, with all his goodly outward apparel of strength and a kind of beauty, to some savage, wild creature—some beast of prey, whose spirit sat in his heart, and looked out of the windows of his eyes. With all the dread and foreboding that he had begun to inspire in her, she always thought of him as ‘poor Otho.’

CHAPTER XXIV

OTHO'S REVENGE

WHEN Michael Langstroth went into the concert-room that night, rather late, he found the place crowded with an audience, watchful and attentive as only country audiences can be, all in their war-paint and feathers, as Roger remarked, and the choir, in a row on the platform, lustily singing of how

‘The oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree,
They grow the best at home, in the north countrie.’

Going up the room, he found himself near the top of it without having found a seat, and he stood looking about him, when a demonstration a little to one side caused him to turn, and he saw a small, lean hand beckoning to him, and a thin, eager-looking face, brimming over with pleasure, asking him, as loudly as silent expressiveness can ask, to come and sit beside her, and, what was more to the purpose, pointing out a space close to her for his accommodation. It was his little patient, Effie Johnson, radiant in the proud consciousness of a new frock, and an unheard-of treat—that of being the only one of her brethren and sisters privileged to be present at the concert. He nodded and smiled, and gradually made his way to her, receiving many a greeting on his way from ‘all sorts and conditions’ of men and women.

Effie was on a side-bench, he found, and his place was beside her ; but it was a side-bench at the end nearest the platform. Her mother sat at one side of her, and greeted Michael with a nod, and an unusually serene smile. When he was seated, Michael found that amongst his near neighbours were Eleanor Askam, who had found a seat beside Mrs. Parker, after all ; and beside Miss Askam, his brother Gilbert. He did not see either Otho or Miss Wynter, and was a little puzzled ; for Dr. Rown-tree had told him of Eleanor's note to his sister, explaining why she could not go with her.

If he did not see Magdalen or Otho, he did see very distinctly upon Eleanor's face an expression of gravity and even anxiety, impossible to be mistaken ; a very different expression from the one of hope and strength and light-heartedness which she had worn when he had first seen her. Gilbert's countenance wore an expression of composure and even contentment.

Michael sat still, and the crowded, lighted room, and loud voices of the singers seemed to disappear. He was alone with his brother. In all the years that had passed since his breaking with Gilbert, in all the occasions on which Gilbert had been in Bradstane since then, they had never met thus closely, and, as it were, side by side. A deep oppression came over Michael's heart. What was this thing that he felt ? He scarcely seemed to himself the same man he had been, even five minutes ago. Gilbert and Eleanor, sitting side by side, and, as it were, alone ; that was all of which he was really conscious.

'Where have you been for such a long time, Dr. Langstroth ?' whispered Effie, as she nestled up to his side with the confidence of childhood—that confidence which is seldom at fault.

'I have been very busy, Effie, and I have neglected you. I am going to amend my conduct very soon.'

'But you never forget us, do you?' said Effie.

'No, I never forget you, my child; I will come and see you soon.'

Contented, she was silent, and observed the scene with her bright, keen childish eyes looking from her little thin face.

Michael was uneasy and unhappy. At last, unable to endure his suspense any longer, he leaned over to Mrs. Johnson, and asked, in a cautious undertone—

'Have not Otho Askam and Miss Wynter come?'

'Yes,' she replied, in the same tone, and with a significant look. 'They have both gone into the room where the performers wait. Some people think he is going to volunteer a song.'

Michael nodded, as if satisfied with the explanation. He could not help giving a glance towards Eleanor, and he saw that the look of unease on her countenance had deepened. She looked constrained and uneasy. Just at that moment, Gilbert bent over her and said something to her, with a smile, and as he spoke to her, he raised his eyes, and encountered those of Michael. Michael felt, he knew not what, as he met that glance. Was it anger, or grief, or pain that clutched him? It was a hot and burning feeling, which seemed to surge up within him. He did not know—yet—what it was, but he felt as if he must at all risks avoid meeting Gilbert's eyes again. He had never experienced pain like this in any meeting with Magdalen, after their separation. He had thought that he had put Gilbert away from him altogether; that he had become no more to him than Magdalen, or than the merest stranger on the road. This terrible emotional

disturbance showed him that he had been wrong. But how? What did it import?

The next thing he saw, just as the closing notes of the glee were sounding, was Roger Camm, who walked quickly up the room, and went into the waiting-room, spoken of by Mrs. Johnson. Then the music ceased; the singers received their meed of applause and left the stage, and then there was a little pause, which was, of course, employed as such pauses usually are, in a general uprising, talking, questioning, and laughing. It was wearisome to Michael, who, while anxious above all things to avoid looking at Gilbert again, could still not prevent his eyes from being drawn in Eleanor's direction. She recognised and greeted him gravely, but, as he keenly felt, not indifferently. She was still, as he could not but see, practically alone with Gilbert, as neither Otho nor Magdalen made their appearance, and Mrs. Parker strayed away to converse with her friends. Then he saw some neighbours—some of those 'charity blanket Blundell girls,' as Otho gracefully called them, and poor Sir Thomas Winthrop (glaring distrustfully at Gilbert, who stood erect and half-smiling, all the while), come and talk to her, and Michael did not move from his place, but sat still, listening vaguely to Effie's prattle, and feeling again and again the same strange, strong and painful feeling shake him from head to foot. Then people began to go back to their places. The noise and bustle settled down, the pause was over. The next thing was a round of applause, and Michael, looking up, saw that Roger Camm had appeared upon the platform, and was going to the piano with some music in his hand. It was Michael's turn to begin to feel uneasy, when he saw Roger's face. There was a savage scowl upon it; no

holiday expression, but one of the darkest anger and displeasure. He looked neither right nor left, but marched straight to the piano, seated himself, and struck some chords, as if to try the instrument; then sat and waited. Michael consulted his programme, and found that the piece was a duet for soprano and contralto, and that the singers were Miss Wynter and Miss Ada Dixon. For the first time he began to connect Eleanor's anxious look, and Roger's angry expression with the words Mrs. Johnson had spoken about Otho and Magdalen having gone together into the little room where the performers waited.

At that moment there was more clapping, and then appeared what seemed to Michael the key to both the black frown and the anxious looks which he had seen. From the room which opened on to the platform, and where they had been waiting, emerged three persons. First came Ada Dixon, who, as soprano, took precedence, and leading her by the hand in the most approved fashion, and with every manifestation of devotion, admiration, and respect, Otho Askam, who, all the time that he led the girl forward, was stooping towards her, and saying something that caused her to simper, and mince her steps in a manner at once gratified, nervous, and self-important. The nervousness was quite visible, but the gratification and self-importance outweighed it. Ada evidently felt herself a star of the first magnitude—the personage of the evening, and was swelling with conscious pride in thus being singled out for honourable distinction. Michael at first only saw the broadly farcical side of the affair, and was inclined to burst into a shout of laughter; but, as these two first figures advanced to the front, and the other became fully visible, he at once began to

realise that there was a very different side to the picture, and that it might prove anything but a laughing matter to those concerned.

Magdalen was perfectly alone, perfectly dignified and composed in her demeanour. With marvellous dexterity she contrived to throw something into her manner which placed an immeasurable distance between herself and the two buffoons on whose steps circumstances caused her to follow. The audience might stare and gape, laugh and point the finger at them; it was impossible to do so at her. She walked straight to her place, and stood there, facing the audience, unmoved, and apparently immovable, while Otho, with a final flourish of his hand, presented Miss Dixon with her music, and retired to a chair at the back of the platform, apparently to be ready to hand her back again when the performance was over. Ada turned, laid her handkerchief upon the piano, after the most approved manner of distinguished artistes, and—climax of impudence, thought Michael, who was now watching every movement of the actors in this tragi-comedy with the intensest interest—nodded to Roger to begin. He looked at her with his deep-set eyes from his white face—for it was quite white, and Michael knew the storm that was raging beneath the impassive expression—looked at her thus, and began.

During the playing of the symphony Ada looked at Miss Wynter, and tried to catch her eye—in vain. The distinguished soprano fumbled with her gloves and her music, and looked ill at ease, despite the great glory which had so unexpectedly (to the spectators, at any rate) descended upon her. Miss Wynter, heeding her no more than if she had been a spider on the wall, stood in calm and motionless dignity, her hands lightly folded in front

of her; her eyes, cool and calm and unembarrassed, moving deliberately from one face to the other of the audience—perfectly able to stand alone before them all, even under an open slight, even while a man who was spoken of, far and wide, as her particular friend, flouted her, in the faces of the assembled county, in favour of a chit like Ada Dixon. In a negative, analytical way, Michael could not but respect her—respect, at any rate, the undaunted fortitude of the front she presented. And when her eyes met his, and her set lips quivered for a second, he rendered homage to her bravery, by a grave and respectful bow.

The duet began; it seemed hours before it was over, but it was finished at last; and then the same grotesque performance was gone through, as had taken place before, but that this time Magdalen, calmly sweeping past Otho and Ada, left them behind, and walked first into the waiting-room behind the scenes. Then Otho and Ada disappeared, hand in hand, as before; and as before, Michael felt a wild inclination to burst into peal after peal of laughter—inextinguishable laughter, which inclination was once more checked by the sight of Roger's white and wrathful face, as he picked up some sheets of music, and disappeared in his turn.

All this had taken place in so public a manner that no one present could fail to be cognisant of it all, and it had been watched with breathless interest and suspense by the whole audience, who, when the actors in the scene had disappeared, seemed as it were to draw a long breath; and then there burst forth a perfect storm of talk, comments, and laughter. This laughter jarred upon Michael's every nerve. Though he knew what a vulgar farce it all was, and had seen its ludicrous side

easily enough, yet he could not bear that others should make merry over it, and he could imagine only too well what it must be as it beat upon Eleanor's brain. He refrained at first from even looking at her; but at last his fascinated mind drew his eyes in her direction, and he saw that she had made a movement as if to rise and go. She was younger than Magdalen, he reflected, and not so hardened to the standing boldly in a false position. She wanted to get away from this, naturally, and she intended to go; he saw it in her look, and saw, too, how Mrs. Parker's hurried expostulation was of no avail. Then he saw Gilbert for a moment lay his hand upon her wrist, and say something in a low voice—only a few words, but they had the effect of making her sit down again, with a look of indignant resignation on her face.

Michael never knew how the performance came to an end. The things he had seen had set him in a state of great agitation. What he saw afterwards only made him feel more bewildered and more anxious. After the first part of the concert, Otho reappeared, and Magdalen with him. She was walking alone, and had nothing to say to him. She took a seat beside Eleanor, who appeared to exert herself to talk to her. Of course, Michael reflected, it was out of the question that Miss Askam should even appear to countenance her brother's behaviour; and Magdalen, being the insulted person, had to be treated with courtesy and apparent cordiality. He could imagine with what an effort this courtesy would be displayed, and he thought she played her part very well.

Otho was seated at the other side of Magdalen, and he occasionally addressed her. She answered him gravely,

but with a cold politeness. Michael could not understand it.

He was an involuntary witness of one other scene in the drama. In the throng, going out, he found himself near the Thorsgarth party; saw Gilbert fold Eleanor's cloak about her, and overheard what was said amongst them.

'Miss Wynter,' inquired Eleanor, 'how are you going to get home?'

'The brougham will be there for me, thank you.'

'Oh, that is all right, then. Because we could have driven you round, if——'

'My dear Miss Askam! Five miles round, on such a night! They say it is snowing.'

Here Michael saw that Otho fixed his eyes upon Magdalen's face, and without speaking, offered her his arm. Michael watched, with a neutral but strong interest, to see what she would do. She took the offered arm, without any smile, certainly, but without any appearance of being angry or offended. Neither of them spoke. They dropped behind Gilbert and Eleanor, who were also arm in arm.

Then when they stood outside, Michael, pausing to see if Roger would join him again, heard Miss Askam's voice—

'There is our carriage. We had better let it go round again, and wait till Miss Wynter has got off, as she is alone.'

'No,' said Otho, signing to the Thorsgarth coachman to stop. 'You get in, Eleanor; Langstroth will look after you. I'm going to see Magdalen home.'

'*Otho!*' exclaimed his sister, in a vehement whisper, 'how *can* you behave in this manner?'

But Magdalen appeared to accept the announcement with the utmost calm, saying—

‘Well, there is the carriage, Otho, coming after yours.’

Then Michael saw how Gilbert led Eleanor, who looked like a person in a dream, to her carriage; handed her in, followed her, and they were driven away. Michael, before stepping forth himself, gave a glance at the figures of the other two; saw Otho say something with a laugh to Magdalen. Then the Balder Hall brougham drove up. Michael waited no longer. It was evident that Roger must have gone when Ada did. It was useless to wait for him, and he took his way home.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE ANTE-ROOM

WHEN the Thorsgarth party arrived at the concert-room, before all the disturbance had taken place, Magdalen went straight to that waiting-room where the performers sat, and which was just behind the platform. She walked quickly thither, and did not know, until she had entered the room, that Otho had followed her. But on turning to close the door, she saw him there, and he walked in after her, not looking at her at all, but casting a quick glance round the room, to see who might be already present.

Those who were there, were Ada Dixon, and one or two other girls who belonged to the choir, and were going to assist in the part-songs. Ada looked very pretty, if a little commonplace and vulgar, in her blue frock, and white fleecy shawl. She sat apart from her companions in solitary dignity, and appeared to be studying her song; and it was in this situation that Magdalen and Otho found her. Ada looked up as they came in, and rose with a heightened colour. Magdalen took no notice of Otho, but shook hands with Ada.

‘Well, Ada, how are you, and how is your song?’

‘Oh, I’m ready with mine, thank you, Miss Wynter; and there’s no need to ask you about yours.’

‘Good evening, Miss Dixon,’ here said Otho, and he too advanced, and shook hands with her. Ada looked both alarmed and conscious. He had never done this before—at least, in Magdalen’s presence.

‘So long as you are here,’ pursued Otho, addressing Ada, ‘things cannot go very far wrong.’

‘Oh, Mr. Askam, what nonsense!’ said the girl, half-pleased, half-confused, and wholly astonished, at this public manifestation of favour and interest. She gave a furtive glance behind her, and was not displeased to find that the audience had been augmented by the arrival of more youths and maidens.

‘Otho,’ observed Magdalen, in her clear, low tones, ‘excuse me if I remind you that this room is set apart for those who take part in the performance, and I don’t think you ought to be here.’

‘I’m going to take part in the performance,’ said Otho, throwing his head back, and flashing a curious glance upon her—a glance which Ada saw, and in her silly little soul at once decided that Otho was paying her more attention than was agreeable to Miss Wynter. That was delightful to her, and she simpered complacently.

‘You!’ exclaimed Magdalen, who had also seen the glance, and who had hard work not to betray the tremulousness she felt.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Otho, carelessly. ‘What’s to prevent me if I choose?’

He brought forward a chair, and placed it for her with a polite bow, and a wave of his hand, inviting her to be seated. Magdalen behaved as if she were paralysed, as in truth she was, in a manner. She had absolutely no precedent from which to judge the meaning of Otho’s conduct just now. She had studied him,

humoured him, flattered him, made him the object of her supreme interest and supreme attention, for more than five years ; and within the last year, she had begun to confess that her pains had been in vain—that he had never intended to proceed to anything more than friendship, and was not likely now to change his mind. And then her own deeds had avenged themselves upon her, for in confessing this, she had suffered tortures, and in trying to act upon it, and to shake off her intimacy with him, she had found that she could not. He had made himself master of what heart she possessed. Her resistance this evening to a demand of his had cost her a pang, and this conduct of his, in consequence, bewildered her. She was thrown off her guard ; she felt that she was groping in a fog, and she knew not how to battle with him. She repented her now, in her soul, of having thwarted him just to-night, since this was the way in which he chose to revenge himself. She could see nothing except to maintain an unruffled personal dignity, which she knew came easily to her, and, if necessary, to retire altogether from the arena. She was calculating altogether without her host in the matter, as Otho soon proved to her.

She took the chair he offered her, and sat down ; and then Otho, taking no further present notice of her, turned to Ada, and, under Magdalen's eyes, proceeded to inaugurate a flirtation with the young girl, in the most outrageously bad taste, and with a persistency and determination from which, as Magdalen very well saw, a more resolute girl than Ada could with difficulty have withdrawn herself. The only method of resistance would have been for the object of his attentions to close her lips, and entirely refuse to converse with him ; and that,

of course, was a method which did not for a moment occur to Ada, whose inflammable vanity, utterly unbalanced by common sense, took fire at his attentions, and construed them into proofs of the most flattering regard.

Magdalen sat quite passive under this behaviour until the choir had gone to the concert-room, to sing their glee about 'the oak and the ash, and the bonny ivy tree,' and then she said, coldly and deliberately—

'Ada, I want to speak to you.'

'Oh, never mind her!' said Otho, carelessly, almost contemptuously. 'A sermon should not come before a song, especially such a song as Miss Dixon is going to give us.'

But old habit was yet strong in Ada. Never before had Miss Wynter addressed her without receiving instant and profound attention, and she received it now. Ada gave it almost instinctively.

'What is it, Miss Wynter?' she asked.

'Only this, that I don't know what Mr. Askam means by behaving as he is doing, and I am quite sure you do not; but one thing is certain,—that Mr. Roger Camm will be here directly, and I would advise you to moderate your transports, and behave a little more like a reasonable being before he comes.'

'Roger Camm, indeed!' exclaimed Ada, nettled. 'He's not my master yet, nor ever will be, Miss Wynter. He may come twenty times for aught I care.'

Never before had she addressed Magdalen in such a tone. It would appear that the latter was in earnest in her remonstrance, for she now appealed to Otho.

'Listen to me, Otho. If you are conducting yourself in this way in order to vex me, you have quite succeeded.

I'm ready to own it, and I will give you whatever explanation you like after this is over ; but for heaven's sake go back into the concert-room before Roger Camm comes. You have no right to behave as you are doing, and he will very speedily let you know that he thinks so.'

'Right!' exclaimed Otho, with a laugh. 'I never ask about right. I do what I have a fancy for.'

'Pray what harm can Roger say of me?' said Ada pettishly.

'I would rather ask, what good he can say of you, if you let him see you making yourself ridiculous in this fashion. In any case, you belong to him, and——'

'Not yet!' exclaimed both Otho and Ada in one voice. Magdalen looked at them both, and showed what was with her a rare sign, betokening strong emotion—a heightened colour in her cheeks.

'Otho,' she said, slowly and deliberately, and with a glitter in her eyes, 'I believe you are a downright bad man; and, Ada, I am certain now that you are a complete fool. You are both doing what you will rue to the last day of your lives.' Magdalen spoke with a suppressed passion, so unusual with her as to cause her physical pain in the effort to control it—passion which would have astounded Otho now, if he had not been too angrily determined to do his own way to heed her.

'To the last day of your lives,' she repeated. 'But I have spoken, and I leave it between you. I wash my hands of you both.'

She got up, and went to another chair at the extreme end of the room, and seating herself at the table, rested her chin on her hand, and fixed her eyes on the floor. Otho whispered something to Ada, who was not quite so

happy as she had been, now that she had heard the denunciations of Magdalen. While he stooped towards her, and she was laughing in a nervously pleased manner at his words, the suddenly opened door let in a louder burst of music from the front. It was closed again.

'Oh, I'm not so late, after all,' began Roger Camm's voice, and then he came to a dead stop, looking from one to the other, speechless. Otho, who was leaning over the back of Ada's chair, raised his head as Roger entered, and looked at him with the disagreeable smile which showed his white teeth and his frowning brows.

'Good evening, Camm,' he said, carelessly, and in so condescending a tone that Magdalen looked up.

Roger advanced a step.

'What does this mean?' he asked, and his hands had clenched themselves, and his face had grown pale.

'What does what mean?' asked Ada, laughing flip-pantly, to conceal her dismay.

'What are you doing here?' asked Roger, standing directly in front of Otho, and looking at him with a frown as black as night.

'What I please,' replied Otho, insolently, and not raising himself from his too familiar attitude.

'That is an odd answer to give me,' observed Roger, incisively, 'when you are apparently amusing yourself with my future wife.'

'Roger!' exclaimed Ada, flushing fiercely, and speaking in a choked voice.

'Ha, ha!' laughed Otho.

At this juncture Magdalen again rose, and came forward once more. She was pale even to her lips, and she walked up to Roger Camm, laid her hand upon his arm, and said—

‘Mr. Camm, you must listen to me. I believe I am the cause of this scene, but I swear it is without fault of mine that it has arisen. He wished me to promise him, earlier in the evening, when I was at his house, that I would let him hand me on to the stage when our song came, and said he would remain in this room while I was here. I said he had nothing to do with the concert, and that I would not consent to it. He replied that he would have his revenge—very manly and nice of him, of course. I suppose this is it, and I must say it seems pitiful to me. If I had known, nothing would have induced me to come here. I can only say he is beside himself, and——’

‘That will scarcely do,’ said Roger, turning away. ‘He is not acknowledged as a lunatic yet, nor shut up, whatever he ought to be, and I will thank him——’

Here the door again opened, and all the performers came into the room. Magdalen said imploringly to Roger—

‘Please go and play the prelude. I will *make* him behave himself.’

There was no time to be lost, and Roger, after hesitating a second or two, followed her directions. Magdalen turned to Otho. For once she found him deaf and senseless to her words. She bade him go to the concert-room. He flatly refused to do so, with a bow and a smile. She said she would not go in herself, if he did not do as she told him; to which he replied, that in that case he would himself go forward, and say that since Miss Wynter was in a bad temper and refused to sing, he offered himself as a substitute. All this passed in low tones, the pantomime being eagerly watched by those who had come in, and who could see the gestures of the speakers and their faces, without hearing their words.

The man's vindictive determination prevailed. If he were mad there was method in his madness. He was prepared to throw all appearances to the winds, and to say or do whatever came uppermost. Magdalen was not; and she had little time in which to decide. Otho offered his arm to Ada, and they went on to the stage in the order before spoken of.

When they all returned to the ante-room, Ada was more uneasy and less triumphant than she had been; and greatly embarrassed too, by Otho's marked attentions in the face of the other performers, who, so far from being awestruck at the distinction conferred upon her, seemed to be tittering amongst themselves at the absurdity of the whole affair.

Roger walked up to Ada, and asked her gravely and quietly if she had to sing again.

'No, Roger,' said she, in a subdued voice.

'Then I think you had better let me take you home,' he said gently, and offered her his arm. Ada took it instantly.

'Oh, nonsense!' began Otho. 'We can't do with that. She——'

'Be good enough to stand out of the way,' said Roger, fixing his eyes upon him with a steady look that boded anything but peace between them in the future. 'I will take Miss Dixon home now. There has been foolery enough to-night. I will settle with you to-morrow.'

This promise was given heartily enough, if in a low voice. Otho, with a sneering laugh, let him pass, and then turned to Magdalen.

'I suppose you are not too overcome to go into the other room,' he said. 'Shall I take you there?'

'I shall go when I am ready,' replied Magdalen,

coldly. 'You are at liberty to go as soon as ever you please.'

'Not I!' said he, throwing himself into a chair near to her. 'I've worked hard enough to get your society. I'm not going to quit it the instant I have secured it.'

Here the choir were again summoned to the front, and they were left alone. Otho had spoken of having worked hard to obtain Magdalen's company, but he sat in silence till towards the end of the chorus, when, as it was the last thing in the first part of the concert, Magdalen rose, and began to gather up her shawl.

'Now I shall go,' she remarked.

'All right!' said he. 'But listen to me, Magdalen; you must let me see you home, and I'll tell you the meaning of this.'

'As if I required to know the meaning of it!' she said, bitterly. 'It is pure malice and viciousness on your part, Otho. Meaning, indeed!'

'You know nothing in the world about it.'

'I cannot talk about it now. I am not going to enter into an argument with you. You have made me feel ill already.'

'Then settle matters by promising that I shall go home with you; or I vow you shall hear me in this very room. I intend to have it out with you to-night, do you hear?'

'Very well—as we go home,' said Magdalen, very coldly.

And, as the door opened to admit the returning performers, and the interval had begun, they took their way to the concert-room, and joined their party.

CHAPTER XXVI

HER HEART'S DESIRE

WHEN the Thorsgarth carriage had driven away, and the Balder Hall one came up, Otho handed Magdalen in, followed her, shut the window, and turned to her. After the bright light around the concert-room door, they seemed suddenly to plunge into utter and outer darkness, and Magdalen was glad of it, for she would not have had Otho see her face now for a great deal of money,—perhaps not even if his seeing it would have secured to her the object for which she had toiled so long and so unsuccessfully—the position of his wife. She did not know what he was going to say to her, but she believed she could guess. She believed that the new line she had lately taken towards him—to-night, and on one or two other occasions recently—had so angered his imperious and exacting temper that he was now going to tell her that their friendship was at an end, unless she would submit to take a lower position with regard to him than she had yet done. She knew—she had been so unhappy as to have to consider the subject, in reckoning with herself about Otho and his ‘intentions’—she knew that she had no ‘dishonourable’ proposal to fear from him. She had maintained always a footing distinctly forbidding such possibilities ; but she

dreaded and feared that he had shaken off what influence she had had over him—that he found he could exist without the counsel and advice for which he had often come to her, and which he professed, had often been of service to him. She believed he was angry that she had dared to thwart him in a whim which he considered to be harmless, and a kind of amusing joke, and that after making the bizarre and humiliating exhibition of himself, her, and Ada, which he had accomplished this evening, he was now going to let her understand that he was about to shake off her influence once and for all. And what was it that she experienced in this idea? Scarcely what might have been expected. Neither anger, contempt, nor indignation, but grief, sorrow, soreness; a yearning unwillingness to part, and a dread of the days when she should not see him; an almost passionate speculation as to whether she could not concede something—keep the man at her side, somehow.

Thus she was glad when the darkness hid her face. He could not see the thrill that shot through her, as she wondered what the next half hour was to bring forth for her, and she managed to control her voice, and to say calmly—

‘Pray be quick. I do not know why I have granted you this favour at all. It is far beyond your deserts.’

‘As for that, there may be two opinions. If you’d heard me out to-night, instead of pouncing upon me as you did——’

‘Do not allude to that. It is over, and I have not repented my refusal to you. It was quite obvious what people thought when you appeared with that girl on your arm. Not for worlds would I have put myself into such a position.’

‘Position—position ! You spit out that word just as women do when they want to make out that their dearest friend is doing something bad. I’ve heard that your friendship is a dangerous kind of thing, Magdalen, but I have never heeded such reports. I don’t know whether they are true or not, but I know you have often talked a lot about friendship, and the duty of sticking to your friend when you have got one. I wondered whether you dared show every one that you were my friend to-night.’

‘Absurd ! To show myself your friend in that fashion means one of two things—either that I am engaged to be married to you, or else that I show myself a bold, vulgar woman, whom any other man might well be afraid to marry. That is not friendship ; it is senseless bravado ; it is being loud and fast, and all to no purpose. Such a proceeding could serve no possible end.’

‘I know that. Do you think I am a fool ?’ said he. ‘But when you began to pitch into me, without losing any time, you made me so wild, that I was resolved to pay you out, cost what it might. Magdalen——’ his voice sank, and it thrilled through her, and with it a sense of dread and terror, and the miserable consciousness that she, who had so long contrived to have the reins in her own hands, was now the one to be dominated with bit and bridle, and made to turn this way and that, at the will of another. She listened, stooping a little forward, in a crouching attitude, waiting to hear her doom. ‘I’ve got what they call a bad character. Whatever it is, good or bad, it is a pretty correct estimate they have made of me. They’ll tell you that I drink, and I dice, and I bet. So I do, and like them all ; and, of course, they’ll tell you I’m no fitting husband for a decent woman. As for decent, I know nothing ; but

from what I've seen of women, I should judge it wanted a bold one to undertake me. If you would, Magdalen—*Magdalen!* I don't say I'd make you happy, for I know I should make you miserable, but whatever I seemed—I can't always answer for myself—whatever I seemed, I'd love you to the end of my life, ten times better than I do now. Dare you do it?'

Silence. The carriage rolled softly on over the snowy road. Otho had seized hold of her two hands. His face she could not see, but she heard his breath, laboured and heavy. A very strange, wild sensation surged through her whole being. As in a flash of lightning, in a kind of revelation, she seemed to see all the terrible possibilities of the dim future—all that could be implied by his 'dare you do it?' He did not urge her when she did not answer; his passion seemed to have softened into patience. He waited and waited for her to reply.

'Otho!'—her face almost touched his as she spoke—'I know what you are. I have been trying to tear you out of my heart. I did not want you there. I cannot kill the love I have for you. I dare do anything for you.'

As she ceased to speak, their lips met in a clinging kiss—a kiss which bound their two fates together from henceforth, for evermore, and which made her heart beat chokingly with terror and passion, but which was utterly devoid of the joy and springing rapture it might have had. When Magdalen said, 'I know what you are,' she spoke the truth. She was nearly a year older than he was, and had all her life seen very clearly out of her passive eyes. When he said, 'Dare you do it?' that meant, and she knew that it meant, not that he was

going to give up his evil ways for her sake, and try to become mild and human and gentle, and a fitting husband for a civilised lady, but that she accepted his evil ways along with himself, and endured them as best she might.

They sat silent for a while after this, till at last he said—

‘Magdalen!’

‘Well?’

‘You are not a good young woman, you know. You have not always stuck to people as you promised you would. They say—every one says—that you jilted Michael Langstroth,—did not keep your promises to him, you know.’

‘They say what is quite true; and Michael Langstroth may thank me if I did jilt him. He was not made for me, nor I for him. I daresay he knows it by now.’

‘He took his dismissal,’ pursued Otho, with a sneer, ‘and never raised his hand. But let me advise you not to try that game with me, or there might be murder done, or something as bad. I’m not Michael Langstroth. Do you understand?’

He spoke in a fierce whisper, and in Magdalen’s laugh, as she answered him, there was a hysterical sound.

‘Do you suppose I don’t know that! For every one of Michael Langstroth’s good qualities, you have half a dozen bad ones. If you wasted your whole life in trying, you could never get as much goodness into your whole body as he has in his little finger; and oh, how tired I was of it—how tired I was, before it was all over.’

‘H’m! Well, I can promise that you shall never tire of my oppressive goodness and piety—that’s all.’

‘I know you are a complete pagan; sometimes I think I am too. There’s one thing, Otho—you must not ask

me to marry you yet ; my aunt would faint at the idea that I was engaged to you, and I am not going to tell her, and leave her, and break her heart. Do you understand ?'

'I understand that you think more of that old woman than of any one in the world,' said Otho, surlily, 'whatever you may profess ; but I suppose you must have your way. And, Magdalen'—he dropped his voice—'confess that you were worsted to-night. You found your master.'

'If I did, he might have been more generous. It was an odious thing that you did, to flout me, and openly play the gallant to a little chit who has always looked up to me with reverence. I can never have anything more to say to little Ada, now ; and I can tell you, the child was almost my only amusement. I don't know who will afford me any entertainment now.'

'I will,' said Otho, with generous promptitude.

'You can't. Here we are, and it is snowing, actually,' she added, as she let down the glass, and looked out. 'Heavy snow ! How on earth will you get home ?'

'I'll walk, of course,' said Otho, jumping out, and holding out his hand to her.

'Walk !' repeated Magdalen, pausing before she got out, to expostulate with him—'walk over three miles in this driving snow—and on such a road ! Indeed, you must not. If you wait, they will get you a gig, or a dog-cart, or something ; it will be lighter than the brougham, and you could put it up at your place till to-morrow.'

'I'll walk, I tell you. Come out ; you'll get your death of cold, sitting there,' said Otho, gruffly and impatiently. 'What's a few flakes of snow to me, now ? Haven't I been in a fever all night ? I tell you, I want to work it off, so let me alone.'

She had got out of the carriage, and they stood on the steps. She was going to expostulate again, but Otho told the men to drive to the stables, he was going to walk home ; and they, nothing willing to turn out again on such a night,—a contingency which they had already discussed,—obeyed with alacrity. The two figures, dark and shrouded, stood within the porch, and Magdalen stretched out her hand towards the bell.

‘Stop a minute !’ said Otho. ‘Heugh ! what a wind !’ as a screaming blast from the north-west whistled past the vestibule.

‘Otho, you must not walk home——’

‘Be quiet, I tell you ; let me alone ! If I’ve a fancy, I’ll sleep in the vestibule, or anywhere I choose. Now, Magdalen,’—he seized her hands in a grasp that hurt them,—‘swear that you will not go back from what you have said to-night.’

‘I swear I will not, Otho.’

‘And that when the time comes—we shall both know when it does—you’ll marry me, and follow me, as truly as I’ll go on loving you.’

‘Yes, I swear I will.’

‘And that whatever happens, you are mine—you don’t cut yourself adrift from me as you did from Michael Langstroth.’

‘There is no need for me to swear that, for I could not, if I would.’

‘All right ! give me a kiss, and let me get home.’

Magdalen put her two hands on his shoulders, and said—

‘I have sworn a good many things to you ; I want you to swear nothing to me ; but remember this, whatever wrong you do me, directly or indirectly, from this time

forward, you do to your *wife*, for you are mine now, as much as I am yours. Good night !'

She kissed him on his mouth, and was turning away. Otho suddenly put his arm about her neck, laid his head for a moment on her breast, and said in a rough, broken voice—

'You have been very good to me, and very patient with me, Magdalen. You'll get your reward, I hope.'

Then he turned on his heel, rammed his cap on to his head, and plunged into the darkness and the snow, which drove blindingly in his face.

He had chosen to walk—persisted in walking, perhaps with some idea of cooling, in the wintry blast, the fever of his hot heart ; for it was hot, and it beat and tossed with restless pain.

'The biggest throw I ever made,' he muttered to himself, as he passed out at the Balder Hall gate, and emerged in the tempest of the open road. 'Will she be staunch, I wonder ? I believe she will. We've been driven together, if ever two lost souls were, and——'

Here he was obliged to give his undivided attention to keeping the right road. Thorsgarth was but three miles away from Balder Hall, even by the roundabout way of the high road. It had been a little after eleven when Otho had turned away from Miss Strangforth's door ; it was nearly two when at last Gilbert let him in at the side door of his own house ; and he entered, pallid, gasping, and scarce able to stand, covered all over with snow, and shading his blinded eyes from the light.

'Good heavens, man ! where have you been ; and what have you been doing ? I was just thinking of rousing the house, and sending relays of men after you, with lanterns.'

‘I’ve been doing my courting,’ said Otho, pulling off his overcoat, and shaking himself; ‘and since winning the lady, I’ve had to do battle with the storm. Have you got a good fire in there, and something to drink? It’s not weather for a dog to be out in.’

‘Which lady have you been honouring with your proposals?’ inquired Gilbert drily.

‘Which? Why, there is only one, and that’s Magdalen.’

‘Oh! It is a pity you did not manage to let other people understand that as clearly as you seem to do yourself.’

‘Come, don’t be crusty, Gilbert,’ said he, suddenly, and without his usual sullenness. ‘You know I have been wondering for a long time if I should do this; and now that it’s done, by Jove, you don’t seem to think it makes any difference to a fellow! I thought you would shake hands, and wish me joy at any rate.’

Gilbert was a little time silent before he answered. Then he said—

‘I can do that, if you like, and do it honestly. I’ve no objection to shake hands with you, and I would rather you met with joy than sorrow; but’—with a sudden change of tone—‘why did you spoil everything by making that hideous exhibition of yourself to-night? Why could you not tame Magdalen, if she wants taming, without embroiling yourself with half a dozen other people? It is too stupid!’

It was not by reproaches like these that Gilbert had got and maintained his power over Otho, but something to-night seemed to drive the words out of him, whether he wished to utter them or not. Otho did not seem inclined to quarrel.

‘What does it matter?’ he said, tolerantly. ‘Let me alone. It will all blow over.’

‘It will not blow over!’ said Gilbert, almost passionately. ‘Do you suppose that Roger Camm will put up with such treatment? He was perfectly frantic, and you will have to reckon with him yet——’

‘I’m quite ready,’ said Otho, scowling suddenly. ‘He had better mind what he is about, in calling me to account, that’s all.’

‘Not only that, but you made yourself ridiculous; and, above all, Otho, you put a public insult upon your sister by behaving as you did in her presence, with a little vulgar fool like that Dixon girl. It is——’

‘My sister chose to come poking her nose into my house, and mixing herself with my affairs,’ said Otho, sullenly. ‘She may take the consequences. Let her go home again to her genteel friends, if she objects to what goes on here.’

‘Bah!’ said Gilbert, with indignation. ‘Have you no sense of decency?’

‘You are cross, Gilbert; and it’s very late. I’m going to bed, and I advise you to do the same. The lecture to-morrow, when you’ve had time to think things over. Good-night, old fellow.’

He took a candle, nodded to Gilbert, and left the room. His friend slowly followed him, looking altogether more limp and less self-assured than he had done six hours earlier.

CHAPTER XXVII

RECRIMINATION

ROGER CAMM, leading Ada away, went out into the passage, and stood at the door of the cloak-room, while she put on her shawl and hat, and then came out to him. Her face was still flushed, and more sullen than downcast. She did not look at him, as she said, 'I am ready.'

He gave her his arm, and they went out, to walk the few hundred yards between the schoolroom and Ada's home. The cold night air blew upon their heated faces, for Roger, though he looked so pale, was in a fever, and Ada's heart was hot with anger and disappointment. Nothing was said till they arrived at the side door which led to the house part of Mr. Dixon's premises. Then Ada observed—

'Well, I suppose after all this, you won't want to come in.'

'Oh, Ada!' exclaimed the young man in a voice of reproach, 'that is cruel. I want to speak to you, of course. I would not go away and leave you alone—the idea!'

'Oh, come in, pray! Now that you have spoiled my whole pleasure, and made me a laughing-stock; taking me away, like a baby in disgrace,' said Ada, in a voice that trembled violently.

They went into the house. The astonished servant came out of the kitchen, on hearing the unexpected noise, but retired when she saw who the intruders were. Mr. and Mrs. Dixon were both at the concert. Ada led the way upstairs, to the family sitting-room, and turned up the gas, and gave Roger the prosaic order to poke the fire.

He did so, and then turned to her. For a little time he stood with his back against the mantelpiece, and his hands clasped behind him. She drew out her handkerchief and held it before her eyes, to conceal the tears which rage and temper prevented from flowing; while she tapped the floor with her foot. It was a cruelly painful ordeal to him, and he was revolving in his mind how to speak to her. How, how was he to reproach her? For reproach her he must. He had gone so suddenly into the ante-room at the concert; for once, he had seen Ada and her actions clearly, and without any flattering veil over them—had seen her openly coquetting with another man, and that a man whose character and station made it impossible for such coquetting to be innocent. It was her innocence and ignorance, he told himself, with yearning love in his heart, which had permitted her to be so misled. All that was necessary was for him to tell her what the real character was, that Otho Askam bore, and she would see what a mistake she had made. But how to begin—what words were soft enough, gentle enough? While he was thus inwardly debating, Ada suddenly looked up.

‘Have you brought me here to play at a quaker’s meeting?’ she asked, angrily. ‘I thought you said you had something to say; and I wish you’d be quick with it, as I’m sure it’s nothing agreeable.’

‘Ada, is that my fault?’ he asked, turning to her with a wistful look.

‘Of course it is your fault,’ was the indignant reply. ‘Why must you fly into a passion about nothing at all, and speak to me as if I’d been doing something worse than any one else ever did, and insult me, and speak in such a way to a gentleman like Mr. Askam—and Miss Wynter sitting there? Am I not to be allowed to speak to a gentleman?’

‘Ada!’ he exclaimed, all the gentle phrases scattered to the winds at the picture which her words conjured into his mind, and speaking solemnly, and even sternly, —‘for heaven’s sake be silent, or you will drive me to speak to you in a way that I shall repent. Gentleman! No gentleman would behave as that blackguard behaved to-night. When I went in and saw him leaning over your chair, I wonder I did not rush at him and knock him down, without a word. Let me tell you that no girl’s character would benefit by its being known that Otho Askam was on friendly terms with her. He is a thorough-paced cad, without honour, or honesty, or principles. Child, child! How could you let him lead you on, in the face——’

‘You’re never jealous!’ cried Ada, her anger turned into something like a smile.

‘Jealous!’ echoed Roger, with unspeakable contempt in his tone. ‘When I have to be jealous of him, it will be all up between you and me. I boil with rage at the pollution you suffer from his familiarity. Ada—you do love me, my darling, don’t you?’

‘Why, yes, of course,’ said Ada, slowly.

‘Then you must promise me to have no more to do with him. See to what you have driven me already. I

shall have to have a reckoning with him to-morrow. I shall tell him what I think of him, and promise him a horsewhipping, if ever he ventures upon such impertinence again——'

'Roger !' The presumption, the audacity of his words, caused Ada to turn pale.

'And of course,' Roger went on, calmly, 'I shall have to shake the dust of this place from my feet. I have no fear of not being able to get another situation ; but it may be some little time first ; it may be a long way from here when I do get it ; it cannot be here, of course ; there is no other place here. And that will separate us. You did not know or foresee all this ; you could not, but it is so, you see. And I cannot speak quite calmly about it.'

Ada was silent. Roger thought she was thunderstruck on being shown the consequences of what had doubtless seemed to her a few flattering attentions.

'I don't see the good of making all that fuss about it,' she said at last. 'There was no wrong in Mr. Askam's saying a few words to me ; but people will say there is, if you go on in that way.' (A feminine view of the case which had not before occurred to Roger.) 'I have always been a friend of Miss Wynter's——'

'Yes, indeed ; and precious little good it has done you,' was Roger's ill-advised retort.

'And Miss Askam sat talking with me for nearly an hour the other day. There's nothing strange about it. I have always felt at home with the gentry about here, and there's proof positive that it isn't only the gentlemen who notice me——'

'Notice you—notice you !' he said, stung intensely by her words. 'Who wants you to be noticed ? You

have no need of any one's notice. No honest girl has——'

'Honest girl! Well, I declare!'

'Your lines are not cast among such people. They only amuse themselves with you, whatever you may think. If you keep them at a distance they respect you. As for Miss Wynter, I have always disliked her——'

'Yes, you have; and without a scrap of reason. You think she's worse than poison, and say all sorts of things about her,—false, I've heard you call her. And there was she before you came in, talking to Mr. Askam and trying with all her might to make him behave himself——'

'Oh!' said Roger, turning sharp upon her, with an expression of bitter pain upon his face. 'If *she* did that, he must have needed it, sorely. And you said to me that there was no harm in what he was doing. Ada, my girl, this is cruel; it is, indeed.'

'Oh dear!' exclaimed Ada, mentally anathematising her maladroitness. 'She was just as bad as you, for making too much of it. I only meant to show that she is not the false woman you call her.'

'I judge her by her actions. As for Miss Askam, she is different. Dr. Rowntree knows her, and he says so; and Michael Langstroth——'

'Oh, I know he thinks so. And of course he's always right!' retorted Ada, excitedly. 'Every one knows that. I suppose if he had been talking to me, we should have heard none of all this.'

'Not a word; you are quite right,' said Roger, constrainedly. 'I should have known there was some reason for what he did. But that's just it. No one ever hears of him making a fool of himself in that way, and

behaving like a cad at a public entertainment. It isn't in him.'

'I know I'm awfully tired of hearing Dr. Langstroth's praises for ever sung. And as for Miss Askam, of course he says she is an angel, and an angel that's pretty thick with him, by all accounts.'

'What do you mean? Who says anything against them?' asked Roger, indignant at her tone.

'Goodness! I never said it was against them. I see no harm in it; but then I'm not so strait-laced as some people. They've been seen riding together, not so long ago, and he called there when Mr. Askam was away.'

'Their meeting was a pure accident.'

'Oh, of course! Such things are always accidents,' said Ada, with a laugh.

'Do you mean that you doubt me, Ada?' he asked, very seriously.

'Doubt *you*?—not at all. I suppose Dr. Langstroth said it was an accident, and of course we all know he has nothing to do but speak, and you do what he tells you, and believe what he says.'

This shaft fell quite ineffectually.

'It does not matter who circulated the report,' said Roger. 'Every one knows that Miss Askam is a young lady of the very highest character.'

'She's perhaps got all the propriety for herself and her brother as well——'

'It is very certain that her brother has none. And that brings me back. Ada, you will promise me not to have anything further to do with him, will you not, dear?'

'If he speaks to me, I suppose I'm to shut my mouth and not say a word?'

‘He shall not speak to you again in any way that you cannot answer.’

‘Oh, what do I care for him? I want none of him, especially if there’s to be all this fuss made about it,’ said Ada; but she did not meet his eyes as she spoke.

‘That’s my own dearest Ada!’ exclaimed Roger, too much pleased with what he considered her promise, to notice anything else. ‘And by to-morrow night, I hope to have done with him for ever. I will speak to your father, and make it right with him. And now let us forget it all, and have some music by ourselves, shall we?’

But Ada was by no means to be so easily pacified. She declined the music entirely, and said that such a concert could not in the least make up for the one she had lost. After some utterly abortive attempts to keep up a cheerful conversation, all of which she cut short with snaps, or yawns, Roger at last relieved her of his company, and went on his way, with the dreary, blank sense that he and she were thoroughly divided in their opinion upon the occurrences of the evening.

But she was so young, so innocent, he said to himself. What could she possibly know of the real character of a man like Otho Askam, or of the sinister and compromising nature of any attentions from him? Patience, patience! he preached to himself, and it would all come right. When she was married to him, and he could speak plainly to her, soul to soul, there would be no more of these misunderstandings, these clouds and disputes. She would be innocent still, but not ignorant any more.

And, perhaps, so far as he was himself concerned, it was better for his soul’s health to be free from all connection with a man like Askam.

Thus he reflected, as he took his homeward way, and on arriving at the Red Gables, found the rooms dark, and Michael still absent.

About half-past ten he arrived, and found Roger alone, in an easy-chair by the fireside.

‘Halloa! Back again!’ exclaimed Michael.

‘Ay!’

‘You took her away altogether, did you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Quite right, too. Brutes like him want showing that they can’t ride rough-shod over every one and everything.’

‘Michael, do you think he is a little cracked?’

‘Not a particle, unless being born bad, and a bully, is being cracked. It is a somewhat debatable question, you know, now. We are so very liberal and tolerant in these days. It seems to be the theory that if by chance you behave decently, you ought at once to have a statue put up to you; whereas, if you conduct yourself like a savage, or a blackleg, or as if you had been brought up amongst professional thieves, and the lowest riff-raff, the thing is, that you are not quite all there, poor fellow!—that’s all, and ought not to be considered accountable for your actions. It’s not a view that I ever took, and I say that Otho Askam is no more mad than you are at this moment. He’s vicious, and he’s a bully. And I suppose that Miss Wynter had crossed him in some way, and he wanted to punish her publicly. That’s about the tune of it.’

‘Bullies are usually cowards,’ observed Roger, reflectively.

‘And so is he. Wait till the time comes when the shoe begins to pinch,—when his sins come back to him,

and demand house-room with him, and bring their children by the hand, and when he has made such a hole in his estate that even his guardian angel can't stave off the remarks of creditors; then you'll see where his brag ends.'

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to look on at such a moment,' said Roger, speaking out of the pride and the blindness of his heart. 'To-morrow he will have to whistle to the tune of my saying good-bye to him, and leaving him to his own resources. I'm not a "gentleman born," like he is——'

'Now come, Roger. You'll be saying next that all "gentlemen born" are like Otho Askam, and all "working men," as you are pleased to call yourself, are just like you—on the same level, and with the same feelings. Keep within bounds.'

'Not a gentleman by birth, like he is,' Roger went on softly; 'but I am a human being, with susceptibilities, and with coarse desires and impulses. The former have been wounded by his behaviour to my betrothed, which I consider to have been wanting in respect. The latter inspire me to tell him he is a cad, threaten him with a horsewhipping, and cry quits with him. Don't say anything against it, because I am going to do it, and it's no use your worrying about it.'

'I—worry. Nay, you may choke him by knocking his own impudence down his throat, if you like; I have nothing against it. I am sorry for his sister, I must say. Did you see her to-night?'

'Yes,' said Roger, tranquilly. 'So did you. She looked superb.'

'And miserable, poor thing! Who would guess them to be brother and sister?'

'Who, indeed?'

‘I cannot imagine that she can be very happy in that house.’

‘I can’t imagine that any decent person would.’

Then Roger lighted a pipe, and smoked it, before going to bed. Michael pulled out a book, and said he had some reading to do. How soon the one slept, how much the other read—these things have not been ascertained.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE MILLS

WHEN Michael came down on the following morning, he found Roger gazing out of the window, at the snowy prospect, and drumming his fingers on the pane.

‘A jolly day for you to turn out, Michael. Have you to go far afield?’

‘Not very; but I have a good deal to do. Balder Hall is the farthest place I have to go to. I must see Miss Strangforth.’

‘Ah, well, it is not a very good road.’

He turned to the breakfast-table, and they had both made some progress with the meal, when Michael observed—

‘Roger, you said you were going to have it out with Otho Askam to-day.’

‘So I am.’

‘Do you mean to give it him hot?’

‘I mean to tell him that I have done with him, and to promise him a horsewhipping if he ever looks at my young woman again,’ said Roger, roughly.

‘Do you know, I don’t think it is the best thing you could do.’

‘Better make him a speech, thanking him for his politeness and condescension, perhaps,’ said Roger, bitingly.

‘Oh, nonsense! You know that is not what I mean.’

The thought in Michael’s mind, of which he could not, of course, speak to Roger, was, that the girl was not worth making a great fuss about. He found it difficult to speak very seriously on the matter, looking at it from his point of view, and felt a sorrowful surprise at Roger’s denseness.

‘What I mean is this,’ he went on. ‘Otho Askam is not exactly like other men; he’s a greater blackguard than most. You might as well harangue this table as expect to make him ashamed of himself, or get him to see that he behaved vilely last night. That’s the sort of creature that he is. And if you quit him at a moment’s notice, people will be quite ready to say that there was more in it than met the eye. I think that, for her sake, you should be careful.’

Roger moved uneasily in his chair, and a deep flush of anger was on his face.

‘Curse him!’ he exclaimed, at length, with emphasis. ‘It would be a good deed to choke him!’

‘Oh yes! But we have to put up with human vermin where we should scotch them if they were snakes.’ Michael spoke more lightly, for he saw that his words had taken the effect he wished them to have, without his having been forced to say what he thought; that though Otho had doubtless behaved abominably, yet that Ada Dixon, by conducting herself like a fool, and a vulgar one, had put no impediment in the way of his so behaving.

‘You know, he can sue you for breach of contract if you inconvenience him, and that would be confoundedly expensive, and very disagreeable—for you could hardly

mention in a court of justice the reason why you left him at a moment's notice.'

'But I could pay the fine, without making any row.'

'And make every one think that he could say more about you than he had done, if he chose to. No; you have to deal with men as they are, you know, and not as they should be; and you cannot treat a poisonous thing in the same way you might one that has no sting. I should advise you quietly to give him three months' notice; don't let him see that you think so much of him as would be implied by your leaving him on the spot. Say you want a situation in a large town; you often have wished it, you know, and——'

'And Ada!' said Roger, in a constrained voice. 'While I am palavering to save appearances, I must pass over the insult to her, without a word. As if I should trouble my head about him, except on her account!'

'Roger, I don't think you can accuse me of being wanting in a sense of honour; and if you will believe me, you will honour her, and consider her more truly, by not mentioning her name in Askam's presence. You proved last night that you knew how to take care of her; why condescend to name her to him again?'

There was a pause, during which Roger looked dark and angry, but at last said abruptly—

'Yes, yes; you are perfectly right. But oh, Lord!' he added, almost grinding his teeth, 'it can't be a good law that protects a cad like that from a horse-whipping. And I would like to be the man to give it him.'

'Of course, the fighting animal in you would,' said Michael, who had hardly been prepared for such intense bitterness on Roger's part. Could he have seen clearly

into his friend's mind, he might have found that the thing which added bitterness to the gall was a first glimmering consciousness that the fault had not been wholly on the side of him whom he so freely apostrophised as 'cad' and 'blackguard.'

'There's a higher thing though, than a fighting animal,' pursued Michael; 'and that is a gentleman, who does not walk in the dirt, unless circumstances oblige him to.'

Roger made no answer to this oracular utterance, and they presently separated and went their several ways.

Roger, in the office, pondered upon Michael's words, and knew they were right. He swallowed down his consuming anger, and determined to be discreet in what he said and did. If Otho came down to the mills that morning, well and good. If not, Roger would, he thought, either write to him with his decision, or go and call upon him that evening. With an effort, he mastered the vexation that had been gnawing at his heart, and turned to his work.

The morning, which despite the snow, had broken bright, clear, and sharp, clouded over, till everything looked very sad and gray;—the street where the tramping work-people had pounded the snow into a dirty slush; the mill-yard itself; the river flowing sullenly past, deep and flooded.

None of them all could be grayer than the spirits of Roger Camm. He began to wonder how it was that he had so little luck, and tried hard to see his way, even for a yard before him, but not with much success. By degrees, to his trenchant mood succeeded one of despondency and aversion to everything. He began to hope then that Otho would not come down; so far from

desiring to give him a horsewhipping, he now felt as if it would cost him a disagreeable effort even to look upon his face ; he would prefer to write to him, and get the whole thing disposed of without words or glances.

This was not to be. About half-past eleven he saw two horsemen enter the yard—Otho Askam and his guest, Gilbert Langstroth. Otho called a man to hold their horses, and they dismounted and entered the office ; but not before some conversation had passed between them outside. Roger saw how Gilbert pointed here and there with his whip, and stood reflectively looking about him. Then, after Otho had shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows, they came slowly towards the office. Roger felt dreary, cross, and cynical. The effort had to be made, and he was in no mood for making it. The deadly, nauseous flatness which is the reaction and the avenger of strong excitement, had taken possession of him. He scarcely looked up as they entered ; barely returned Gilbert's courteous 'good morning,' but he noticed that Otho came in with more swagger than usual, and that in his insolence he did not condescend to utter a greeting of any kind.

'What business?' he asked.

'There are the letters,' replied Camm, as he pushed them across to him.

Otho took them and stood near the fire. Gilbert turned to Roger.

'I have been talking to Mr. Askam,' he said ; 'and I find that he has not insured that new machinery that came the other day. I think it ought to be done as soon as possible.'

Otho looked up.

'What's that? Oh, insurance! You are at it again.'

‘I should imagine that Camm would agree with me,’ said Gilbert.

‘Why, of course,’ replied Roger. ‘It is a thing that ought to be done at once, and I have mentioned it several times.’

‘Do you hear, Otho? Now do be reasonable, and get Camm to write about it at once, and have it settled now.’

‘Not I!’ said Otho, laying down the letters. ‘We’ve spent far too much money already in insurance. Insurance is all bosh. The mills are insured; and where’s the use of a thing, or the amusement, if you go and arrange against all accidents beforehand?’

At this novel view of the merits and uses of insurance, Gilbert gave a short laugh; but having some personal interest in the matter, presently resumed an air of gravity, and said—

‘Oh, you must not gamble with everything; and even if you do, it’s wiser to calculate your chances a bit, unless you are clean mad.’

‘What answers have you sent, Camm?’ inquired Otho.

‘Those,’ replied Roger, pointing to some envelopes that lay on the desk.

This extreme brevity, which for the life of him Roger could not have altered, seemed to have an irritating effect upon Otho. He glanced at Roger, and almost showed his teeth along with the scowl he gave. But he picked up the letters and read them. As for Roger, the mere presence of the other made him feel that his own power of self-restraint was not so great as he had, in a moment of despondency, imagined it to be. His blood was running with wild speed through every vein; his hands did not tremble, but he felt breathless, excited,

furious ; and as he happened to catch a glimpse of Otho's face, dark, nearly hairless, and coarse in its very handsomeness, with its scowling brow and sinister smile, and recollected how, last night, he had seen that face bending with a more insolent expression than it wore even to-day, over the fair countenance of his Ada, and how the latter had been seen raised towards that of this man, with every sign of pleased and flattered self-complacency, he felt a longing to have his hands at Askam's throat. Truly, he felt, he and these other two were no better suited to one another now than they had been fourteen years ago, when they had played together in the old garden at Thorsgarth.

Gilbert, who was leaning against a desk, with his eyes half-closed, and looking tired and bored, was, as usual, taking it all in. He had been a witness of the scene last night, and Roger's pale face and compressed lips now, and the glitter in his eyes as he looked towards his employer, were not lost upon him.

'Come, Otho, haven't you nearly done ? It is time we were moving,' he said.

'Yes, I'm just ready,' replied Otho, laying down the letters. 'They're all right, I think.' He never interfered with anything that Roger did ; his reading the letters was a form to be gone through, for he knew absolutely nothing of business of this kind, though he could have rattled off, correctly and nimbly, the pedigrees of twoscore celebrated racers.

'Well,' said Gilbert, once again, 'won't you think about the insurance ?'

'No,' retorted Otho, impatiently. 'I've no money to spare for insurance.'

'Turning economical with advancing years,' observed

Gilbert, with polite sarcasm. 'Let me tell you that fire and water and bad luck never spare a man because he had not money to insure himself against them, and——'

'How you preach!' almost snarled Otho. 'Tell you I don't mean to insure. Come away.'

'I should like to speak to you before you go, observed Roger, composedly.

Otho, hearing this, turned sharp upon him, grasping his whip in his hand, and the insolence in his eyes growing bolder. Gilbert looked quietly, but with equal interest.

'What is it?' asked Otho, his hand on the door-handle.

'Merely that I am thinking of leaving Bradstane. To-day is the twenty-fourth ;—it was the twenty-fourth when I came to you. I wish to give three months' notice to you, as I shall leave you at the end of that time.'

'What the devil is the meaning of all this?' demanded Otho, loosing the door-handle, but holding the whip faster, and turning upon Roger with a black look of anger. Roger, eyeing him fixedly, thought within himself—

'How did I ever bear with him for this length of time, the brute!'

But he answered civilly and tranquilly—

'That is scarcely the way in which to speak to me. I say that I wish to leave your employment this day three months. Isn't that simple enough?'

'I'll be hanged if it is!' said Otho, savagely. 'It's usual to give a reason when you leave a place,—and I want to know yours.'

'I would advise you not to ask for it,' was Roger's answer, his face growing paler, his lips tighter, his eyes more dangerous, as his anger grew hotter within him.

‘What! may a man not ask his servant’s reasons for leaving him?’ began Otho. ‘It’s the first time I ever——’

‘Don’t be a fool, Otho!’ here observed Gilbert. ‘Roger Camm has as good a right to give you three months’ notice as anybody else; and he’s in the right of it, when he says you had better not ask his reasons. Of course you’ll want a written notice, and of course you’ll get one. So come away.’

‘I say,’ observed Otho, suddenly changing his angry demeanour into one of facetiousness, and with an impudent smile, ‘perhaps you disapprove of my attentions to a certain young lady, last night; but I can tell you——’

‘If you mention her name, I’ll give you the hiding you deserve!’ thundered Roger, springing up, and walking very close up to Otho, whose laugh now changed to a look of furious anger.

‘You are threatening me!’ he demanded, in a voice of suppressed rage.

‘I shall not confine myself to threats very long,’ was the breathless reply.

Otho’s eyes looked dangerous still, but he seemed also amused, in a curious manner.

‘Then it is about the little girl that you have cut up rough. Lord bless you, she isn’t worth thinking about twice!’ he said, bursting into a loud laugh. ‘Which was the worst, eh?—she or I?’

‘You blackguard!’ said Camm, between his clenched teeth. ‘I’ll——’

His hand was raised, and there was fury in his eyes. The words seemed surging in his brain, and burnt upon his heart. The tone of them lashed him to perfect mad-

ness. If he had got hold of Otho's collar the results might have been unpleasant, but he felt Gilbert's hand on his arm, and Gilbert's voice whispered in his ear—

‘Don't you see he is just leading you on? You are not a prize-fighter, if he is. Let him go!’

Roger's hand dropped. Otho was watching him with a look of hatred in his face which was far stronger than the sneer which his lips tried to form. He was insolent, and he carried the matter off with a laugh, but it had roused his worst hatred and his blackest animosity.

‘I said I would go in three months,’ said Roger, constrainedly, clenching his hands down, to keep himself under control; ‘but you have made that impossible. You can look out for yourself from this moment. I will not darken your doors again, if I can help it.’

With which, picking up his hat, he pushed Otho unceremoniously to one side, and walked out, leaving the others to make the best of the situation.

His heart was sick as he walked away. Such a scene his very soul abhorred. All the tingling desire to chastise Otho seemed to evaporate as he left his presence. He felt again nothing but loathing, aversion, and a wish to keep as clear of him as possible. But reptiles can sting, and Otho had stung. As Roger passed through the street, and saw the windows of Ada's home, his impulse was to call there and see her; he hesitated, paused, walked on.

‘She's not worth thinking twice about. Which was the worst, eh?—she or I?’

His heart, wrung with shame and anguish, called upon her name. No. He must not go in now. He must wait until hours had passed, and reflection had come to his aid.

He went on to the Red Gables, and found Michael just in from his first round. To him Roger related what had happened, and what he had done.

‘I could not help it,’ he said. ‘I began civilly enough, and prudently enough ; but when that cur gives tongue I lose my head. He has never happened to do it before, about anything in which I had any concern ; but as soon as he began, it was all up with me. I left him and your excellent brother to settle it as they best could ; I walked off.’

‘Well, I cannot blame you,’ said Michael, when he had heard him out. I should have done the same, or more. But it is an odious business.’

‘It is a vile business,’ replied Roger, gloomily ; ‘and until after Christmas, I shall be at a loose end, for it is useless trying to see after anything before then.’

CHAPTER XXIX

A FALSE STEP IN GOOD FAITH

THE day after that unfortunate fracas at the mills was Christmas Day. It will easily be understood that to Roger it did not this year form the most cheerful occasion imaginable. He had seen Ada on the evening of the twenty-fourth, and some kind of a reconciliation had then been patched up between them, but one which set Roger thinking, and made him feel that many differences of opinion might be less disastrous than such a making up of a quarrel. It had not been spontaneous ; it had been largely due to the intervention of Mr. Dixon, who was very indignant with his daughter for what he called 'making such an exhibition of herself.' He condemned Otho Askam in no measured terms, but his blame of Ada and her 'want of sense' was almost as strong. He wanted to know where she meant to draw the line in her folly. He added that she was doing her character no good by such 'carryings on,' and uttered a dark hint as to the implacable nature of his wrath should she ever in the future disgrace, or as he expressed it, 'lower herself' in any way whatsoever.

During the paternal admonitions Mrs. Dixon maintained an ominous silence. As has been before said, she did not favour Roger's pretensions, and had always looked

to her daughter to marry well ;—not what Mr. Dixon considered to be well, but what she, his consort, understood by the term. On returning from the concert, and finding that Ada had gone to her room, her mother had repaired thither, and had extracted from the girl an account of every word uttered throughout the evening, by herself, Otho, Miss Wynter, and Roger. She had not said much, save some strong expressions condemnatory of Roger's behaviour, which she characterised as 'tyrannical,' 'impudent,' 'masterful,' and 'odious,' and expressed indignation that her daughter should be forced to do the bidding of such a man. But at the recital of Otho's attentions there was an expression in her face which Ada did not interpret as one of displeasure.

By Mr. Dixon's orders the young woman had received her betrothed with outward friendliness, though she declined with quiet, persistent obstinacy, to say she was sorry for what had happened. Reconciliations made to order are apt to carry about them a very strong flavour of their artificial nature and origin, and this particular reconciliation bore the stamp of unreality very plainly to be read.

On going in on Christmas Eve, Roger was, for once, not at all sorry to find that the Dixons had friends with them. Mr. Dixon received him heartily, Ada demurely, Mrs. Dixon coldly, scarcely speaking to him at all. There was a miserable constraint and unreality about everything. Roger felt it a relief to himself, and had a bitter conviction that it was also one to Ada, when he had to tell her that he had promised Mr. Johnson to take all the organist's duty on the following day, in order that that official might take a holiday and visit some friends. His time would, therefore, be so much taken

up that he would not be able to call and see her before service. She heard his excuse with indifference, and Roger went to bed that night, and arose also on the following morning, with a heavy problem agitating his mind. How was he to treat her? What was he to do with this wilful creature whom he loved so much, and who had succeeded in making their mutual relations so miserable and so embarrassed? For it was he who had been sinned against, as he very well knew, and though in his tenderness he was ready to condone that, and would have eagerly made an effort after any reconciliation that should have reality in it, yet the sense of duty and of the fitness of things stepped in, and told him that to let a condition of things be initiated in which the woman was to be humoured even when wrong, and the man was to beg forgiveness for all misunderstandings, whether caused by himself or not, was simple madness. Yet how he was to institute anything more reasonable, he did not see, unless Ada were brought to see that she had behaved badly, of which truth not the most glimmering consciousness seemed to have been afforded her.

With this trouble in his mind he went to church on Christmas morning, and tried, almost unconsciously, to find a solution to his difficulties in the language spoken to him by his music. To a certain extent he found what he wanted; he received soothing, and that alone was a help to counsel. It was not the first time that music had come to him with healing on her wings; most likely it would not be the last.

Seated up in the organ-loft, and looking into the mirror in front of him, he could see, not only the vicar and his curate, but a good many of the congregation

too,—all diminished, reversed in position, moving up and down silently, rising and sitting down again like automata or dream-creatures. His sight was keen and long. He could identify a good many of those who came in, and amongst them he saw Ada and her father and mother. Ada, he perceived, was not so prostrate under the shock of their quarrel as to have neglected the claims of Christmas Day to be considered a *fête* day in matters of toilette. She was dressed gaily, and he saw a pretty face, looking prettier still in the framework of a smart and becoming new bonnet. It was a fresh, sweet face, seen thus in repose, and at a distance, and his heart yearned towards its owner, and he tried to put out of his mind the ugly recollection of the same face turned upwards towards Otho Askam, with a smile, and afterwards looking at him, cross, distorted, pouting.

Whether the music inspired him, or the sight of Ada, he knew not, but there flashed suddenly into his mind the recollection that he must most likely soon lose sight of her, for a considerable time at any rate, and with this recollection the conviction that that was the best thing that could possibly happen to them both. Separation for a season would, he argued, teach them both to look upon things with less prejudiced eyes. She would miss him, and want him, and he would learn to be less indignant at what had happened between them.

As he came to this conclusion, which he hugged as a conviction, because it presented to him a way out of his difficulty with regard to the most judicious course to take with Ada, he perceived Gilbert Langstroth walking up the aisle behind Eleanor Askam, and they went together to the great square pew belonging to Thorsgarth. Roger began to wonder if Michael was right in

thinking there might be something between them. Then he saw the choir and parsons coming in, and he wound up his voluntary, and the service began. When it was over, he played the congregation out to the music of a quick movement from a sonata of Beethoven—a passage full of storm and stress; of pain, struggle, and striving. And as the wild and noble music pealed out, some of his pain and unrest passed away with it.

When he had left the church, and got into the churchyard, it was almost empty. One or two groups still lingered in conversation. Ada and her parents were not amongst them, but Roger was surprised to see Gilbert and Miss Askam still there. She looked very pale, he noticed, and grave, but also very beautiful in her dark brown velvet and furs. He raised his hat, and was passing on, but Gilbert stepped forward, and to Roger's bewildered amazement, accosted him.

'I have been waiting for you,' said he. 'I want a word with you, if you can spare a moment; and Miss Askam desires me to present you to her;' and he turned from one to the other.

Again Roger's hat came off, and he could not find it in his heart to look with anything but gentleness upon this sad young face, in which he, like Michael, had begun to perceive a nobility and firmness of expression beneath the mere beauty of outline, which expression attracted him whether he would or no. She only said a very few words to him, quietly and simply.

'I wished to make your acquaintance. I have heard much about you from Dr. Rowntree, and from my friend, Mrs. Johnson.'

To which Roger gravely replied that he was highly honoured, and had heard also of Miss Askam from the

same friends. He perfectly appreciated the spirit which dictated this advance from her.

‘She would repair the wrong, if she could. Poor thing ! She might as well try to sweep back the ocean with a besom.’

Then Gilbert said to him, ‘I had no opportunity of speaking to you the other morning, but I want to do so particularly. I have business to discuss with you. Will you meet me to-morrow morning in the reading-room in the town—say at twelve, or earlier if you like?’

‘Certainly. Twelve will suit me perfectly. It will no doubt be better that we should have a little talk.’

‘Thank you. I shall be punctual,’ said Gilbert, with the air of a man who is much obliged.

They parted, and Roger took his way to Mr. Dixon’s, where he had been bidden some time ago, to dine and spend the day ; not because he felt any sudden desire for their society, or they for his, but because it was Christmas, and it is the proper thing to go and make merry with your friends and relations at that season. He had to go out once more to play at the evening service, except for which interval he spent most of his time in the company of his betrothed and her parents, with what results may be imagined. Ada was no more gracious, no more penitent to-day, than she had been yesterday. Roger’s conviction that a temporary separation would be good for the spiritual welfare of both became stronger. He imparted his idea to Mr. Dixon, in a private conversation with him, stating his reasons, and Mr. Dixon entirely agreed with him. They both brought heavy broadsides of common sense to bear upon the question, and neither of them could do more ; neither of them could have understood, if some scatter-brained person

had stepped forward, and assured them that to settle a question of that kind it was most desirable that to common sense should be joined a little of the much rarer and more precious quality of imagination. They saw facts, and they grappled with them in the very best way in which they knew how ; and they were at one in the opinion that Ada, if left to herself a little, might come to a better mind.

On the following day, at noon, punctual to his appointment, Roger repaired to the reading-room in the town. There was no one there ; it was holiday time, and people were otherwise amusing themselves. As he waited for Gilbert he could not but reflect how it was they came to meet thus.

‘He knows I wouldn’t set my foot inside Thorsgarth, and he knows, too, that he need never again darken the door of his brother ; so we have to sneak into a public room, where there is neutral ground. It is an odious state of things, and I shall be glad to be out of it.’

He had not long to wait. Gilbert arrived directly afterwards, and looked pleased to see him.

‘I am much obliged to you for coming,’ began Gilbert. ‘It gives me hopes that I shall be successful in my errand.’

‘I thought you would want to know how the books stand and so on, for the benefit of my successor, when he arrives.’

‘Of course that will be necessary, but it is not what I came about to-day. I won’t waste words in telling you how annoyed, and more than annoyed I have been—I may say mortified and disgusted, at what has just taken place. I know the value of your services, and that this is no fitting recompense for them.’

‘I don’t know about the value of my services, but I feel as if I had been rubbed the wrong way, and that by no means gently,’ said Roger.

‘Of course. And you will naturally be unwilling to remain without a situation longer than is necessary.’

‘Naturally. I have done nothing about it yet, because nobody wants to hear about such things at Christmas-time; but I thought of advertising, or perhaps writing to my former employers directly.’

‘Yes, of course you could do that. But I have it on my conscience that it was to oblige me and to do me a service that you left those former employers, and it must be my business not to let you suffer for that.’

‘You are very kind,’ said Roger, perfectly appreciating the unusual nature of this long memory. ‘Very kind, you are; but I don’t see how any one could hold you responsible for what has happened, or consider it your fault if a man whom I have had to do with is such a blackguard, and shows his blackguardism in such an offensive manner that I have to leave him. I’ve had my wages for more than six years, and——’

‘You have done a great deal more than that. You have stuck to the affair from the beginning, and worked it through good and bad, till from a doubtful venture you have made it into a profitable business. Any common foreman might have stayed in his place and taken his wages. You have been something different. But there is no need to beat about the bush. I have a proposal to make to you. I have had a fair measure of success in the business in which I am engaged. I think of finally settling accounts with Mr. Askam, who has never cared for business of that kind. I shall pay him the remainder of the capital and interest still owing to him,

and continue to work the mills on my own account; and I thought that under those circumstances you might consent to remain, since you would have the entire management of the concern, and of course a share in the profits, and would have absolutely nothing further to do with Otho Askam. What do you say to it?’

The proposition took Roger by surprise, and embarrassed him at the same time, for it made his decision concerning the separation of Ada and himself seem less than before the only reasonable one to come to. But he was not a man who came to such decisions in a moment of carelessness or impatience, and, having once arrived at them he was hard to move. At first there was a strong feeling of temptation,—the sensation that Gilbert’s proposal put an end to all difficulties, and made his way clear before him. This, which was the natural feeling, he immediately began to distrust, chiefly because of his previous resolution to leave Bradstane, and after a few moments of rapid thought decided that to make things clear and right between him and Ada, he would make any sacrifice; and if this was the sacrifice required—the giving up of this opening—why, the more promptly and rapidly it was accomplished the better.

‘This is what I never expected,’ he at last said, slowly, ‘and it is very tempting.’

‘That means, that it does not tempt you, but the reverse; is it not so?’

‘No; it does tempt me very much. But there are private reasons—reasons which I can’t quite explain to you, which I am afraid will prevent it.’

‘If you say that, I suppose I must not press you. But I am very sorry, if you think you cannot do as I wish. There are several reasons why I wished it very

much, apart from the one that you are far better suited to the post than any one else I could possibly find. One is, that if you had accepted, there would have been no further settlements required, since I know you so well ; —no question of references, or recommendations from other persons.'

'Yes, I understand that.'

'But, if you do not come to me, but take another situation, you will have to refer to your former employer, who, in name at any rate, has been Mr. Askam.'

'Well, and what can Mr. Askam say of me that is not creditable?'

'Nothing—with truth. But you are aware that he is unscrupulous and extremely vindictive.'

'But there is such a thing as an action for defamation of character, if people tell lies about you. I have not the slightest fear of any such thing. He may dislike me, but he is not quite mad, and he simply dare not do it.'

'I fear you do not know him so well as I do. "Daring" has simply nothing to do with it. He is not a man who dares or dares not. He is a creature who yields to every impulse of anger or passion, as blindly and unquestioningly, almost, as when he was a child. He has got an intense hatred for you now, because you have thwarted and spoken plainly to him, and he is now capable of committing any folly in order to punish you. What I wished to say is this, that if you will allow me, I will do all in my power to see you placed as soon as possible in a situation at least as good as the one which, from no fault of yours, you are forced to leave. And if I am the first to hear of such an opening, I will at once communicate with you ; if you are the first, all I ask of you is, that you will write to me, and not to Mr. Askam,

for references. Then I shall be able to see that justice is done, and that no scandal takes place.'

Roger yielded to the honest impulse which arose in him, to lay aside all suspicion, and thank Gilbert heartily and unaffectedly.

'I don't pretend it is not a matter of importance to me,' he said, 'for it is; and I am thankful to be helped forward a bit. I feel very grateful to you.'

'You won't take a few days, then, to consider my proposal about the works here?' said Gilbert, looking almost wistfully at him.

Roger shook his head slowly.

'I think it is better not,' said he. 'I have considered my whole situation carefully since Friday night, and I am perfectly certain that I am best out of Bradstane for a time, both for my own sake, and for that of those most bound up with me. And when I settle down, it would be as well that it should not be here, but somewhere else.'

'Very well. I shall not attempt to alter your decision now. We must see about another situation as speedily as possible.'

There was a little pause, during which Roger thought some rather puzzled thoughts. He could not understand Gilbert—that was very natural—and he owned that the character of the other man was a problem to which he had not the key. He felt the charm of manner which years of growth and cultivation had developed in Gilbert, and which is a thing not to be described in so many words. He understood also that Gilbert was acting the part now of a gentleman, an honourable man, and a friend. He gathered that Gilbert disliked and abhorred the conduct of Otho Askam, and his character. That was

a group of characteristics which went harmoniously together. What he could not understand, in his simplicity and straightforwardness, was that this same man should still be the friend, adviser, visitor, companion of Askam, whose whole conduct was so indecent and brutal; and that in past days he should have descended to the very base intrigue which he had undoubtedly conducted, with regard to the disposal of his father's property. That intrigue, when discovered, had alienated his brother from him for ever; and, reflected Roger, suddenly, whose money was it with which Gilbert proposed to carry on the working of the Townend Mills? There had never been a word said about the two thousand pounds which Michael had rejected, but which Gilbert had probably manipulated all these years. This wonder started up suddenly in his mind, and with all his disposition to think well of the man who was so readily and so ungrudgingly stepping to his aid, Roger could not stifle those other voices, which spoke of another phase in the said man's character.

His thoughts on the subject, though this was the drift of them, were not thus orderly and formulated. They ran vaguely and ramblingly through his mind, in and out of one another, uncertain and shapeless.

Suddenly Gilbert observed—

‘I was present at the concert in the schoolroom the other night, and I saw what happened there.’

‘Ay; along with the rest of the world,’ said Roger, writhing under the recollection of it.

‘Yes; and you must excuse me for mentioning it. I feel it a duty, I may say. There is no harm in your leaving Bradstane under the present circumstances; but there might have been, but for something that has taken

place since the concert. But for this, I should have told you plainly, as a friend, that you would do foolishly to go away, and leave your *fiancée* exposed to the possibility of receiving further attentions from Otho Askam. It would have been by no means an impossible contingency. Now, I am glad to say, there is no danger of it.'

'Indeed ; and pray to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for such immunity ?'

'Just to this, that after the concert he saw Miss Wynter home, proposed to her, and was accepted. He had accomplished his purpose of frightening and subduing her, though it seems to me that in order to clinch his victory he had to go farther than he intended.'

'She has got him at last, then,' said Roger with contempt. 'And now I think of it, that will be an advantage to me, for she can never have anything more to say to my little girl, and there will be an end to an intimacy which I have always detested.'

'Yes, you are right to be glad of that. Hers is not a friendship I should desire for any woman in whom I was interested.'

'The wicked always gain their ends,' said Roger, unguardedly. 'I did hope she would never succeed in catching him, so far as I hoped anything about it.'

'She is not so fortunate, even from her point of view, as you suppose,' said Gilbert, tranquilly. 'She has certainly got what she aimed at, but sadly deteriorated from what it was when she first began to scheme for it, and with it she has got a lot of other things thrown in, which she could well have dispensed with. If she were any one else I should feel sorry for her.'

'You say that what she schemed for is deteriorated ; now, excuse my saying it, but how is it that you too cling

to that man? That is a thing which I have been wondering ever since you came here this year.'

Gilbert's face changed a little.

'I suppose it must be unaccountable to many another, as well as to you,' he said. 'I can only say that it is because he was true to me, in his way, long ago, when I had other hopes and other ambitions than I have now. He was not afraid to declare that he was my friend, and that whoever spoke against me, insulted him. It would conduce greatly to my comfort and peace of mind, if I could forget that; but I cannot. So my relations to him are defined, not by my present opinion of him, but by his conduct towards me in former days. Other things happened at that time; I know it is useless to speak to you of it, but he stood my friend when no one else would have done. Otho Askam is my Old Man of the Sea. We all have one of some kind, and it seems to me that the best thing to do with them is to carry them quietly as long as one's strength holds out.'

'You say it is useless to speak to me of that past time. But, since we have got so far below the surface in our talk, there is one thing I would like to tell you, without any prejudice to my friendship with Michael. You sent a note to him one day.'

'Yes.'

'He gave it to me to read at the time.'

'Yes?'

'I urged him to take a day to consider the matter, and I have always felt that you were wronged by his refusing to do so. But his own wrongs at that time were so incomparably greater than yours, and his heart was so broken, that I have always condoned the fault, though I was sorry for it. Now you know all.'

‘I am glad you have told me. His heart was so broken, you say,’ said Gilbert, speaking with an evident effort. ‘I did not dare to think of anything connected with him, then. He—is he—do you think it would be a breach of confidence to let me know something of his circumstances?’

‘I am afraid he would think so. He does not even know I am meeting you.’

‘Ah! Say nothing then. But—his engagement with Miss Wynter. Surely he cannot regret now that it was broken off?’

‘I don’t suppose he does. That did not make the blow at the time less hard.’

‘No, no! I should have fancied somehow that he would have married some one else. But he has not.’

‘No, he has not.’

‘Do you think he has ever cared to?’

‘He never had, up to a little while ago.’

‘And now you think he does?’

‘No, I don’t. I think he has been so well disciplined by what he has gone through that it would take a great deal to make him really want to marry any one. He can’t help admiring beautiful things, but he won’t do anything so disastrous as to fall in love with the lady I am thinking of. And besides, I know nothing about his feelings, really. He does not wear his heart upon his sleeve—now.’

‘No. Of course I look upon all this as said in confidence; and I think that for the present we have settled all we had to do.’

‘Yes, quite, I think. And I assure you I am much obliged to you.’

‘Not at all. I am glad to have had the talk. You have my London address, I think.’

‘Yes. How long do you remain here?’

‘Only a few days more.’

They exchanged good mornings, and separated. Roger, going home, was very thoughtful. He knew he had taken a momentous step in refusing to remain in Bradstane. He believed it was the best step that was open to him, and he took it. It is what men have to do on their way through life. Steps of some kind we have to take, though each one may be fraught with consequences which we cannot foresee, and which we can only appreciate after we have lost all power in the matter. We can look on, in these after days, at the results of our actions; it is permitted to us to rejoice in the fruits of our conduct, or, as often as not, to repine over the same, or to beat our breasts and wish we had never been born,—but not to alter by so much as a hair’s-breadth, the direction of the road opened out long ago by our own deed.

CHAPTER XXX

SERMON, BY A SINNER

GILBERT had said to Roger that he was only remaining a few days longer at Thorsgarth ; but as a matter of fact, he stayed till over the New Year,—being able, seemingly, to put off the business which, he every now and then remarked in a casual way, called aloud to him from London. He could hardly have enjoyed himself much, during the latter portion of his visit—at least, that was Eleanor's feeling, as she uneasily watched the course of events after the concert. For a few days she was quite in the dark as to the exact state of things. Of course she lay awake a long time on that particular night, feeling uneasy about every subject to which her thoughts turned,—Otho, Gilbert, Magdalen, Ada ; she felt no sense of security or comprehension with regard to any one of them. Why did Magdalen, after behaving so well at first under the insult which Otho had put upon her, fall off so lamentably afterwards—tamely submitting to his behest, and allowing him to drive home with her ?

And Gilbert—in whom, to a certain extent, she had put her trust—was no more than a broken reed. He had promised to see that all should go right, and, on the contrary, everything had gone wrong—just as wrong as it could possibly go ; and he seemed neither vexed

nor uneasy about it, but allowed things to take their course.

When she met Otho at lunch, after his quarrel with Roger, and saw his sullen look, and heard his sulky, curt remarks and replies, she felt miserable, in spite of telling herself that it was no affair of hers; and she did not venture to inquire what had angered him. She vaguely dreaded to hear his reply. The Christmas Day, which happened also to be a Sunday, came; and the doctor's Christmas-tree was to be on the twenty-sixth. She had not seen Mrs. Johnson since the concert, and was therefore in ignorance as to what had happened at the mills, and it suited Gilbert for a day or two to say nothing to her. So she lived on in uneasiness, and sometimes caught herself thinking of her former life, which she had left six weeks ago, as if it were a hundred years away from her; and of her uncle and cousin Paul on their travels, as if they were inhabitants of another world, journeying on seas and in lands unheard of.

Things were in this condition on Monday afternoon, and she was sitting alone in her parlour in the waning daylight, when Barlow came in with a message from Gilbert, to know if she would see him. Her thoughts, which had strayed away from the painful present, were suddenly pulled back again to their post. Instinctively bracing herself to meet something disagreeable, she bade Barlow show Mr. Langstroth up, and then sat and waited for him.

In a minute, however, he was with her; and, as usual, his presence, unwished for, and even dreaded in anticipation, proved in reality soothing, almost agreeable. Eleanor struggled against this power of Gilbert to make himself agreeable to her; resented it deeply in her heart,

as a sort of disloyalty to his brother, to whom she had in her soul given irrevocably and for ever, the place of master of her heart and destiny. This last was as strong a feeling as anything which could be experienced ; but, nevertheless, Gilbert possessed this power of being agreeable to her when he came, and the fact puzzled and annoyed her more than she would have cared to own.

‘You are very kind to let me see you,’ he said at once, as he took the chair she pointed to. ‘I have been wanting to speak to you for a day or two—about Otho.’

‘Ah, I knew it was about Otho. Say on, and let us have done with it.’

‘Perhaps that will not be so easy, either. However, I will say on, as you suggest. Before I could speak to you, I wished to accomplish a certain piece of business. I have now done so, and am free to say what I like. I suppose you have been noticing how angry Otho looks, without being able in your own mind to assign a cause for it?’

‘Unless the cause is that he is unhappy because he has been doing wrong.’

Gilbert repressed a smile.

‘I am afraid I cannot comfort you by confirming that theory of yours. By “doing wrong,” I suppose you mean his little escapade at the concert the other night. Yes, I see. Well, I imagine he has forgotten all about that by now. He is angry, or “unhappy,” if you like, because he has been, and is being, put to great inconvenience, and he doesn’t like it ; it makes him uncomfortable.’

Then he told her about the quarrel between Otho and Roger, with a sort of amused carelessness, as if he had been diverted by the combat, and somewhat contemptu-

ous of the combatants, which tone puzzled and did not reassure his hearer.

‘Otho does not like office work,’ he went on, smiling openly. ‘He has not had much of it yet; but the factories reopen to-morrow, after the holiday, and then he will have to try a little of it. I have telegraphed to a man whom I know to send down some one suitable, and I have promised Otho to wait until the some one comes, and just to put him in the way of business; but it may be a week or so before my friend can hit upon the right kind of man. That makes him very angry——’

‘You don’t seem to think anything of the way in which *he* has behaved,’ burst forth Eleanor, indignantly, the colour high in her cheeks. ‘I think it is the most abominable thing I ever heard of—his treating Mr. Camm in that way. It is—it is——’

Words failed her. She felt as if she would choke with anger and disgust. Gilbert’s eyes were fixed upon her face; the slight smile was still hovering about his lips.

‘You talk about what makes *him* angry, as if it mattered. He deserves to be put to inconvenience. He does not deserve to be helped out of it. What becomes of Mr. Camm?’

‘Oh, I have seen Roger. We understand each other. But don’t you want to hear all that I have to tell you? I have another piece of news.’

‘What is it?’ she asked, feeling from the way in which he spoke that it must be news of some importance, and staying her anger to hear it.

‘Something else has happened, which ought to have made him forget his anger, one would think. I told him he ought to tell you about it, but he says he won’t; it is

all between him and her. He does not feel inclined to talk about it, and, in short, I see you half guess already. Yes ; it is quite true. He got engaged to Miss Wynter the other night.'

'Engaged—to—Miss—Wynter !' Eleanor stared at him incredulously. 'She took him—after what he had done ?'

Gilbert laughed aloud.

'She took him, it would appear. I thought you ought to be informed of it. Probably all the neighbourhood is gossiping over it by now, and you would have looked ridiculous if you had heard people talking about it, and had not understood.'

'I—oh, to be ridiculous is nothing, it seems to me, if one is not disgraceful,' said Eleanor, and paused, because she could not help wondering what Gilbert felt about it himself. If she were to judge from his present manner, she would have said that he regarded it all from a superior standpoint, as a kind of joke amongst some unsophisticated creatures, whose habits it amused him to study ; but, recollecting the very different tone he had lately taken, and his present avowed conviction that he thought it serious enough to come and tell her about it, since Otho would not, she felt that his motives were quite beyond her comprehension. So she ceased to speculate upon them, and turned her attention to another point.

'It is all very extraordinary to me, and most disagreeable—the way in which it has been done,' she said, and again caught the curious expression, half amusement, half—what ? in Gilbert's look. 'You know them both much better than I do. Do you think it will be for his good ?'

'In a way, I am sure it will. It is perfectly certain

that whatever kind of woman Miss Wynter may be, as a woman, she is the only one who has, or ever had, any shadow of influence over him. She knows him thoroughly. She knows the frightful risks she is running,—perhaps she does not feel them frightful—and she knows the precarious state of his fortunes at the present time. With her eyes open she has taken him. If they would or could be married at once she might do a great deal to retrieve his affairs.'

'I did not mean that exactly,' said Eleanor, going on with what she did mean, despite what seemed to her Gilbert's look of mockery. 'I was thinking more of the moral influence. I should have thought that a woman of higher mind—one who would have roused him to better things——'

'Yes, that is a very fine idea,' said Gilbert, with ready benevolence—'that theory of overcoming evil with good. The thing is, how far is it practicable? You speak as a woman, and a good woman. I see as a man, and a man of the world. And speaking from my knowledge of men in general, and of your brother Otho in particular, I should say Miss Wynter would make him a far more suitable wife than the best of women, filled with high aspirations and noble aims. Magdalen Wynter understands him by reason of being composed of a similar clay. Understanding him, she will lead him—at least, very often. A saint would simply exasperate him into something ten times worse than he is. You do not know the ease, the comfort, and the help it is to be understood; how it can keep a wavering man in the right, and drag a sinning man out of the wrong. Good people don't need half as much understanding as bad ones, and with due respect to you and to current notions

on the subject, saints and people who never do wrong are not those who are the most sympathetic and comprehending. It sounds very degrading, I daresay, but it is true—true as anything can be.’

Gilbert spoke with much more emphasis than usual, and with a shade of bitterness in his tone. Had Roger Camm been there, he would have understood it in a moment; it would have confirmed some vague suspicions long entertained by him. But to Eleanor, it seemed as if Gilbert were composing an apology for wrong-doing; making it out as being rather meritorious than otherwise. With emphasis equal to his own, and with some bitterness in her tone also, she replied—

‘I daresay you may be right. Men of the world usually are right, on the outside, at any rate; but I look inside, and it seems to me that all this is very sad and dreadful, too. Life is full of these horrible contradictions, and it appears as if you can never have any good or beautiful thing without, as it were, a heap of dust and ashes beside it, spoiling it all.’

Gilbert laughed a little, and she felt chilled—not vexed with him—as she was conscious she ought to have been, but discouraged by the fact that he was about to differ from her.

‘Why, of course,’ he admitted. ‘Is it not in the very nature of life, as we know life, that it should be so? What are the good and beautiful things, as you call them, except sacrifices and aspirations or struggles after something higher and better than our everyday fight and grind? And how can you have beautiful sacrifices without something bad and mean to call them out? and how can you aspire after the better, without a worse which makes the better desirable to you? But for the dust-

heaps, I do not really see how the shrines and temples would ever get their due share of admiration.'

'Admiration!' repeated Eleanor, indignantly; 'as if one *admired* a holy place! I daresay you have risen superior to all such superstitious considerations, but I say again, I think it is horrible; and I maintain that I do not think Miss Wynter is a good or a high-principled woman, and I am very sorry Otho is going to marry her.'

'Which of them do you look upon as the temple, and which as the cinder-heap?' asked Gilbert politely, but with a queer look. Eleanor was furious with herself for laughing out, quickly and readily; but she had to admit that Gilbert had the best of it. Then a sudden gravity came over her; she caught her breath, and looked at him in renewed bewilderment. In what light did he wish her to see him; how did he desire her to view him, that he, who had cheated his brother, and undermined his father's integrity, should have the effrontery to sit there and talk lightly about wrong being necessary to call forth the higher life, and to say that temples could not be properly 'admired,' unless there were sordid details close to them, to emphasise their beauty? Seen from her point of view, his conversation was sickening in its hypocrisy and unreality; and yet—again the feeling of surprise came over her—she was interested in it; she could not feel revolted. Was the man's personal influence really so potent as to nullify all the effect of what she knew to his disadvantage?

Gilbert had listened to her last words with an amused smile, betraying by nothing whether she hurt him or not; his gaze met hers steadily, and he continued to watch her while she silently reflected. At last he said, lightly still, and coldly—

‘I see you are wondering what to make of me. It is very natural—in you; and if you can trust me far enough to believe that anything disinterested can proceed out of my mouth, I would suggest to you not to go on wondering any more, but to listen to me, and attentively consider what I have to say to you.’

Eleanor started, reddening with confusion, and feeling, with a sudden revulsion, as some child might, which, instead of attending to its professor’s discourse, had been speculating about the wrinkles on the brow of the learned man, and was suddenly called to order. An immense distance seemed to open up at once between her and Gilbert. She remembered the sentiments she had attributed to him of admiration for herself, and felt that egregious vanity must have led her very far astray.

‘Indeed, I will listen to whatever you have to say. I think you are very kind to take so much trouble about—poor Otho.’

“‘Poor Otho,” as you call him, is my oldest friend; I know him better than any one else does, except perhaps the lady we have been speaking of, whose acquaintance with him dates from the very same time. You laughed just now—you could not help it. Does not your common sense now explain to you that it is much better to take men as they are, and provide them with the best that circumstances will allow, instead of wanting to insist on their having for mate an ideal which does not suit, and which they would hate if they had to live with it? That is my view of the case.’

‘Very well,’ said she, resignedly. ‘Go on.’

‘I was about to observe that though Otho certainly appears disposed just now to kick over the traces altogether, and not listen to anything that any one has

to say to him, yet I think I may still say, I have more influence over him than any one else has. But upon my soul, I do not know how long it may last. He has got some notion into his head which, for a wonder, he has not confided to me, and I cannot answer for the freaks which it may inspire him to play. I wonder if you will think me impertinent for asking, did you know much about Otho and his character before you came to live here?’

‘No—at least, my uncle, Mr. Stanley, used to say he was afraid Otho was rather fast, and told me not to let him bet. I think,’ added Eleanor, with rather a sad smile, ‘that if we had known him better, we should not have wasted our words in that way.’

‘I think something still more probable is, that you would not have wasted your time in coming here.’

‘I did not choose to come here. It so fell out that this was the right place for me to come to.’

‘You had nowhere else to go?’

‘Practically nowhere. My aunt died, and my uncle’s health had so given way that he and Paul—my cousin, and their only child—have gone to travel together for an indefinite time. Where should I have thought of coming to but to my *home*?’

She raised her head, and looked at him both proudly and sadly. Gilbert’s eyes fell—not in confusion, but reflectively.

‘True,’ he admitted, after a moment. ‘And you intend to remain here?’

‘Certainly I do. Why should I go?’

‘Oh, there are many reasons. It is not a pleasant house for you to be in.’

Eleanor felt as if Otho’s conduct were being com-

mented upon, and she herself tutored by some one who was much more master of the situation than she was. She did not exactly like it, but she was powerless to resent it; she did not quite know whether she wished even to resent it.

‘It is a dreary house,’ said she at length. ‘It is depressing to me, too. But I don’t know that one may always leave a place just because it happens not to be pleasant.’

‘Ah! You know Otho is going away when I do?’

‘Yes.’

‘I will answer for it that you will not see much more of him till after the Derby Day, and perhaps not then. Don’t you think it would be advisable for you to have a change, too?’

‘A change—in the depth of winter—after being here just six weeks? No, I do not.’

‘You are very decided, I see. Pardon me for pressing the question again. Are you quite decided to stay here?’

‘Yes. Why not? Why should I go away? It is my home, as I said before,’ she said, looking at him rather impatiently.

‘You will be very dull. Otho, you see, has no scruples about leaving you, and will not return an hour the sooner from the knowledge that you are here alone.’

‘And if I like Bradstane, and wish to remain at Thorsgarth, in spite of this dulness, and in spite of what Otho does?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Of course, in that case. There are compensations sometimes, which go a long way towards repaying a little dulness and solitude. Every one to his taste. If that is yours, I may as well proceed to tell you that my advice to you would be to prepare for reverses.’

‘Reverses?’

‘Yes. Racing, and the sort of horse-dealing in which Otho indulges—never to mention a dozen other expensive little trifles that he likes, are not profitable occupations, and he has not found them so. I speak plainly. You may live to see very evil days at Thorsgarth, if you choose to remain here. You may live to see Otho reduced to poverty, and, if your feelings are easily worked upon, your own fortune in danger—that is, if you should let yourself be deluded into the idea that you can help him out of his difficulties, and set him on his legs again.’

‘I think I could meet reverses, if they came, without too much lamenting.’

‘In addition to which he may at any time get married to your favourite, Magdalen Wynter, and request you to find another home.’

‘I have a house of my own, and I should not wait to be asked to go.’

‘Oh, you mean the Dower House—a nice old house, that. It stands quite near to my own old home, the Red Gables.’

‘Yes. I have thought sometimes it would be a pleasant house to live in, as——’

‘As you are so much alone,’ interposed Gilbert, almost eagerly. ‘Don’t you really think that it would be much better than for you to be here, alone, without chaperon or companion——’

‘Nay,’ interposed Eleanor, half-smiling; ‘don’t twit me with that. I don’t want a chaperon; but if I did, how could I have one, when you know very well that Otho says——’

She stopped. Otho had said that one petticoat in the

house was more than enough for him, and he would put up with no more. Gilbert smiled.

‘Yes, I know what Otho says. I was not twitting you. I only wish you would see that reason tells you to leave him, and not mix yourself in his affairs.’

‘Your reason may. Mine does not. Mine tells me that Otho is my brother; and I’m sure he is wretched with his own wrong-doing, though you scoff at the idea. Do you mean to tell me that Otho is happy?—you cannot. And my reason tells me that, sometime, I might find a way of helping him. He might want to come home and have some one to be kind to him, sometime. And I might be away, and never hear of it till a long time afterwards. I don’t mean to say that nothing would induce me ever to go to the Dower House; that is a different thing. But I will not think of leaving Bradstane. Men’s reason is proverbially superior to women’s reason, you know. Perhaps that is why we don’t agree.’

‘Perhaps it is,’ said he, tranquilly. ‘After what you have said it would be impertinence in me to urge anything further. Perhaps I have gone too far already. I was under the impression that you were very unhappy in Bradstane, but I am pleased to find that my fears were exaggerated. I am very glad you have found mitigating circumstances, and I hope the good may continue to outweigh the evil in your estimation.’

He spoke politely and coldly. Eleanor sat silent and almost breathless. Gilbert had never spoken to her thus before. She was alarmed at his tone, and it brought back to her recollection all the dissertations she had heard from Dr. Rowntree on the subject of his infernal cleverness, as the worthy Friend called it. At the same

moment she recalled a descriptive sentence which she had heard Otho utter not long ago. 'Finding'—he had said, speaking of some acquaintance who had long unsuccessfully wooed a lady—'finding the sentimental dodge no go, he took to intimidation, and fairly bullied her into it.'

A convulsive smile twitched her lips. She did not believe now that Gilbert's altered tone arose from disappointed sentiment. A much more prosaic reason suggested itself to her, namely, that the sentiment had been assumed in order to amuse himself, and see what the effect would be upon her. He must stand sorely in need of some kind of amusement at Thorsgarth, she reflected, and that was the one nearest to his hand. His present demeanour and sentiments were probably those of the natural man. What he had just said convinced her that he did not more than half believe in her desire to remain in order to be of some possible service to Otho. She was more than ever sure of this when he rose and said—

'I will not detain you any longer, I know you are going out this evening, and I know that children's parties begin early, as a rule.'

'Yes, that is——'

'Oh, I know what a benevolent old gentleman Dr. Rowntree is, especially to those who are his favourites. He would like to give them all Christmas presents and kisses, young and old, big and little. I wish you a very pleasant evening.'

She was silent still. Gilbert wished her good afternoon, and departed.

From various allusions which he let fall before he went away, he gave her to understand that he knew

Michael had been at the doctor's party. Eleanor tried to ignore these hints, and to look openly at Gilbert when he spoke of his brother; but her heart was hot within her, with mingled fear and indignation; fear lest he should even yet harbour some scheme of harm against Michael; indignation at what she considered his audacity in naming him, and a miserable sense that she had better not provoke him, or the results might be bad for Otho. Gilbert sought her society no more; he had no more of those pleasant, gentle things to say to her, such as he had uttered on the night of the concert. She became convinced that he regarded her with dislike, if not with enmity, and she withdrew herself as much as possible from his and Otho's society. Gilbert had yet another twist to give to the tangled coil into which her thoughts had got, concerning him, and he did it ingeniously. He was alone with her in the drawing-room, after dinner, on the evening before the day on which he and Otho were to depart.

He took a card case from his pocket, extracted a card from it, and gave it to her.

'That is my London address,' said he, with the blandest of smiles. 'If you should ever—since you will remain at Thorsgarth—find yourself involved in difficulties with Otho, or in any other circumstances in which the advice of a—business man would be of any use to you, telegraph there to me, and I will be with you within four-and-twenty hours.'

'Oh, Mr. Langstroth——'

'Don't, pray, trouble yourself to express any gratitude. How do you know what dark motives may lurk beneath my seeming kindness? We leave by the seventh-thirty train in the morning, so I shall not be likely

to see you again. I will therefore wish you good-bye now.'

'Good-bye,' said she, hesitatingly, feeling as if she ought to add something to the baldness of the word, but utterly at a loss to know what that something should be.

'I shall, I hope, be here again for the shooting, if not before,' said Gilbert. 'I shall hope to find you well, and as pleased with Thorsgarth—and Bradstane, too—as you are now.'

With which he left her, with his words, and the tone of them, echoing in her ears, and with the shadow of his shadowy smile floating still before her eyes. She was as far as ever from being able to decide whether he was a gross hypocrite, or only a man who had once done very wrong, and was now trying to do very right. That he might be something between the two did not occur to her.

CHAPTER XXXI

BRASS POTS AND EARTHENWARE PIPKINS

THE worst of winter had stormed itself away, and it was March—the latter end of March. The leonine portion of his reign had endured a long time this year, and though it was now over, the warmer gales had yet some north-east to blow back, and the dominion of the lamb had not fairly set in. And yet, there was the caress of spring in the air—that caress which is unmistakable, and which may be felt, if it be there, through the bleakest wind and the coldest rain. This caress was in the air, and the hue of spring was in the sky. Here and there her fingers had swept aside the withered leaves, and allowed a violet to push its way up; and in some very sheltered southern corners appeared a tuft or two of primroses. In the garden borders at Thorsgarth, the crocuses were beginning to make a gallant show. The blue behind the rolling white clouds was deep and profound,—steady and to be relied upon. In the shady corners of the garden, under the budding trees, the clumps of daffodils were putting forth their tender first shoots, ready to nod their heads and laugh through the April showers. And the grass, too, was recovering its colour,—its green, which weeks under the snow had faded and browned. Everything was full of promise.

Nature stepped forward, erect and laughing, jocund, casting the burden of her sadness behind her ; not as in autumn, advancing droopingly towards it.

So much for the garden, the cultivated. Outside, the roads were heavy and soft with mud ; but it was a mud to make glad the heart of man, especially farming man. The ploughed fields, stretching their great shoulders towards the uplands, looked rich in their purple-brown hue. The hedgerows here and there seemed to wear a filmy, downy veil, the first output of yellow-green buds. In the great pastures near Rookwood, on the Durham side of Tees, the giant ash-trees stood yet in their winter bareness, giving no sign, save by the hard, burnished black buds, which for months to come were meaning to hold fast their secret wealth of bud and leaf, their treasure of summer glory. There was every promise that this year the oak would be out before the ash, with, it was to be hoped, the proverbial result.

It was on such an afternoon as this, when the breeze blew from the south-west, that Eleanor walked along one of the muddy lanes leading from Thorsgarth to Bradstane. Beside her trotted Mrs. Johnson's little girl, Effie, whom Eleanor had borrowed a week or two ago from her mother, to keep her company in the solitude of Thorsgarth. For Gilbert's prophecy had been fulfilled. She found it very lonely there, so lonely that she was now on her way, half-willingly, half-reluctantly, to the Dower House, in order to inspect it from garret to cellar, and think whether it would not better suit her as a residence than the great dreary house which had grown so oppressive to her.

As they came in their walk to a bend in the river, Effie suddenly said—

‘How full the river is just now; and so brown and strong! Dr. Langstroth says he remembers the river longer than anything else; and he says that Tees is as broad as Bradstane is long. Isn’t that queer?’

Eleanor laughed. It is an indubitable fact, and one which she had herself noted with amusement during the first part of her stay in Bradstane, that in a town like this, or, indeed, in any small town or village situated upon a stream as big as the Tees, ‘the river’ becomes the important feature of the neighbourhood. What it looks like, whether it be high or low; in winter, whether the river be frozen or flowing; and in fishing-time, what sort of a water the river shows to-day; whether there has been rain to the north-west, which floods it, or whether drought, which makes it dry. Whenever the conversation turns upon out-of-door subjects, the river is sure to assert itself somewhere or other, and that before very long. It is the same as a living thing, and that a powerful one; its moods are watched and recorded as if they were the moods of a person in whom one took a deep interest. It is for ever the river, the river; and this watery friend, and enemy—for it is both—gives a colour, and has an influence over the lives that are lived near it, which is very remarkable, especially to those who know nothing of such surroundings. And Tees, be it remarked, is a river with a powerful individuality, which none in his vicinity can afford to despise.

‘He says that because people think so much about the river here,’ said Eleanor. ‘You must know how they talk about it. You never go anywhere without finding the Tees,—in people’s houses as well as here flowing through the meadows. That is what he means.’

‘I suppose it must be,’ said Effie, who was a philosophical child. And they went on in silence. Eleanor resumed the mental debate which had been occupying her before—as to the wisdom of the step she contemplated taking. It would be separating herself from Otho, at one moment, she thought; and then she remembered Gilbert’s dry words—that Otho left her without scruple, and that no thought of her loneliness would bring him back a moment before it was convenient or pleasant to him to come. That was true; she would most likely see quite as much of him at the Dower House as at Thorsgarth. She had not had a line from him since he had gone away with Gilbert to London. Once or twice she had seen Magdalen, who had mentioned having heard from him; but Eleanor suspected that his letters to Magdalen even, were very brief. Miss Wynter volunteered no details or news, and Eleanor felt no more drawn to her than before, and disdained to ask for information which was not proffered.

Once or twice she had ventured on making a tour of inspection all round the Thorsgarth park and grounds, penetrating even to the courtyards, the kennels, and stables which lay behind the house. What she saw there did not tend to encourage her. She found that everything was conducted with a lavish profusion, a reckless extravagance, which would have been foolish in any case; and it was a lavishness which had also its stingy side, as such lavishness usually has. While necessary repairs were left neglected for months, or undone altogether, many pounds would be spent on some new contrivance for warming or ventilating a stable, already luxuriously fitted up. While some of the men on the farm complained that their carts were falling to pieces,

silver-mounted harness was accumulating in the harness-room, for no earthly purpose except to make a show behind the glass doors. Many another extravagant and senseless fancy or whim was indulged to the full, while ordinary necessities were stinted. It seemed to Eleanor that the establishment swarmed with servants, both men and maids. Their functions and offices were a mystery to her. They always seemed exceedingly busy when she appeared upon the scene, but she had an uneasy consciousness that it was only in seeming, and that as soon as her back was turned, a very different state of things again prevailed. She had been accustomed to a liberal, and even splendid establishment, but one conducted on principles of enlightened economy—without a superfluous retainer, but at the same time without a fault or a failure, from one year's end to the other. The contrast which she saw here offended her sense of decency and order. She knew that Otho ought to retrench, and she would gladly have helped him to do so, with the joy usually brought to bear by women, unskilled in active financial matters, upon this negative process of saving by means of renouncing things.

Thinking over these things, she now walked with Effie towards the Dower House. The old square, when they reached it, looked very pleasant that sunny afternoon; bright sunshine lighting up all the sober, solid old houses, which stood reposefully, as if secure for ever of peace and plenty; their quiet closed doors and shining window panes revealing nothing of the emotions which might be stirring those who inhabited them. The trees on either side the square had begun to show a first tinge of green, like the rest of nature. Not a soul stirred in the afternoon quietness; only Michael's great dog, Pluto, who lay basking on the flags outside the Red Gables, looked and

blinked at them lazily as they passed, and slightly moved the tip of his tail in reply to their greeting. Next door but one was the Dower House—a pleasant old stone building, gray, with a door in the middle, and two windows on either side; upstairs five windows, and a third story with five windows more. It was, in fact, a large, substantial stone house, very suitable as the country residence of a single woman of some means and position. It stood on the sunny side of the square, and like nearly all the houses in it, its gardens and its pleasantest rooms lay to the back. It was furnished with old-fashioned furniture, and kept in order by an old gardener and his wife, who lived there. Eleanor liked it. She liked the windows looking into the broad open street. Such a prospect seemed to bring her nearer to humanity, and to the wholesome everyday life of her fellow-creatures. The recollection of Thorsgarth, rising stately from its basement of velvet sward, rendered dark by the towering trees which surrounded it,—of the terraces sloping to the river; the flights of steps, the discoloured marble fauns and nymphs—this recollection came over her, and made her feel dreary. She felt as if she had lived in it all for years, and had no joy in any one of them.

In her own mind she almost resolved to go to this other house, but she wished to wait for Otho's return, and explain it all to him—if ever he should return; if only he would return!

Three days later, without letter and without warning, he came home, late in the evening, having no apologies to make, and very few remarks concerning his long absence and silence. He sat for an hour or two with his sister, and she found something in his looks and aspect which did not tend to allay whatever anxiety she might

have felt about him. The ruddy brown of his skin had grown sallow and dark, and his cheeks were hollow. There was a haggard look about him, and the traces, unmistakably to be read, that he had been living hard and fast. His eyes had sunk ; he was not an encouraging spectacle, and there was an uneasy restlessness about him which fretted her. She tried to talk about commonplace things.

‘Did you see much of the Websters?’ she asked, alluding to some distant cousins with whom she had been on terms of intimacy in former days—days which now seemed very far back.

‘Websters—no ! When I go to town, I don’t go to do the proper with them. I have other friends and other places to go to.’

‘Lucy told me in a letter that Dick had met you somewhere.’

‘And I’ve met Dick,’ retorted Otho, with an uncomplimentary sneer ; ‘and a precious prig he is.’

‘Indeed, Otho, he is not. He is a very nice lad, and very free from priggishness. That’s his great charm.’

‘He’s a young milksop.’

‘He is neither vulgar nor dissipated, if that is what you mean.’

‘I haven’t wasted my time in thinking about him.’

‘And Mr. Langstroth—how did you leave him?’

‘Gilbert—oh, he’s flourishing. By the way, he sent a message to you,—rather a complimentary message—and he told me to be sure and not change it into the very reverse of what he wished it to be.’ Otho chuckled a little. ‘Let me see. He wished to be remembered to you, sent his best compliments, and hoped to see you again during the year—perhaps when he comes for the

shooting. I fancy Gilbert was a bit taken with you, Eleanor. He was mighty particular about his message.'

'You fancy very uncalled-for things.'

'Hey, but I wouldn't mind having him for a brother-in-law,' persisted Otho; but he was too careless even to look at her as he aired his views. 'A first-rate fellow is Gilbert, and he has rid me of those blessed factories, and stumped up like a man. I've never repented standing his friend when I did.'

She made no answer, and as they were alone (for Eleanor had judged it better to send Effie into the background) there was a silence—that profound silence only to be heard in the country. Suddenly Otho started, passed his hand over his eyes, and exclaimed impatiently—

'What a hole of a place this is! What a deadly stillness; it's enough to give one the blues. I'd open the window, only that would make it worse, letting in the "swish" of that beastly river, which is a sound I hate. I do detest the country,' he continued, poking the fire with vigour. 'Give me the pavement, and chambers, where you hear the rattle going on all night. This confounded place would depress the spirits of a dog, I do believe.'

'Does Magdalen know you are here? Why don't you go up and see her?'

'Magdalen?' He gave a little start. 'Oh, never mind Magdalen! She understands me. She is not a child, nor a love-sick girl, to expect me to be always at her apron-strings. I shall see Magdalen, trust me. But I'm off into Friarsdale the day after to-morrow.'

'Friarsdale again!'

'Ay! There's a heap of things to see after. I shall

have to be back and forward from there till it's time to take Crackpot down to Epsom. . . . Did you ever see a Derby, Eleanor ?'

'No.'

'Would you like to ?'

'Not when a horse of yours is running.'

'Little starched out puritan ! You might write a tract, or get Michael Langstroth to do it, and have it printed, and salve your conscience over, by distributing it over the grand stand.'

'I have something to say to you, Otho. I do not like living alone in this great house when you are so much away ; and I have been thinking whether to go to the Dower House, and take up my abode there.'

'Hoh !' Otho paused. 'While you are about it, why not cut the whole concern, and go to the Websters ?' he said. 'They would be overjoyed to have you. It doesn't suit you ? I knew it wouldn't ; but you would come. You see, my dear, when a little earthenware pipkin of a woman jumps into the water, and is for sailing along with the brass pots, she generally comes to grief. My life suits me ; but it is so unlike all you have been accustomed to, that you can't fit into it—can't even settle down to look on at it. You look downright ill now, and——'

'Otho ! that shows how little you understand,' said she, a convulsive laugh struggling with her inner bitterness of heart. The whole thing came before her as so tragicomic ; so horrible, yet so laughable. So Otho thought that playing fast and loose with his life, drinking and dicing, brawling and betting, and generally conducting himself like a blackguard, was a fine, heroic thing—a proof that he was a brass pot amongst men, and able to

sail unharmed down *that* stream. Ludicrous, pitiable, agonisingly laughable theory!

‘It remains to be proved which of us two is the brass pot, and which the pipkin,’ she went on, unable to help smiling. ‘For my part, I fancy we are both made of very common clay. But, to leave parables, I would rather not go to the Websters. My ideas about life and others things have changed very much lately. I would rather not return to my old one at present. I should prefer to go to the Dower House, if it will be all the same to you.’

‘Oh, quite. Since you prefer to stay here. It is an odd taste, I think, for a girl brought up as you have been. But you are better away from here. There’s no doubt of that.’

Eleanor was looking at him as he spoke, and saw, more plainly than before, the haggardness, and the lines upon his face; it seemed to her that they had been planted there since she had last seen him, but this might be imagination. She was startled by a resemblance which she fancied she discovered in this altered face of his, to a miniature of their father which was in her possession—that father who had been in tastes, character, and disposition, so utterly unlike the son who followed him. Since coming to Thorsgarth she had often studied this miniature, wondering how such a father came to have such a son. At this moment Otho was leaning his head back, as if weary. His wild eyes were closed, so that their strange, savage look did not distort the likeness. Compunction, longing, yea, love rushed into her heart.

‘Otho!’ she said, in a voice which trembled; and he looked up.

‘What’s up?’ he demanded, seeing with surprise that she had risen and was coming towards him.

‘Dear Otho!’ she repeated, as she knelt before him, and clasped his hand in her own; ‘*why* am I better away from you? Why better away from my own brother, and my father’s house, where he intended me to find my home? It is not right, Otho; it is not right that it should be so. Ah, if you would only be different, how happy we might be—you and Magdalen and I; and where in all your world outside will you find anything that will endure as our love to you will?—for I know that Magdalen does love you, though you treat her cruelly, as you treat me.’

Otho stared down into her face with a strange, alien glance; a shocked, wondering look. He was not rough; he did not repulse her, but he looked as if she had been apostrophising him in some strange tongue, which he could not understand. Presently he said—

‘Little girl, you don’t know what you are talking about. *I* settle down with you and Magdalen! Heaven help you! I should be mad, or dead of it in a very short time. It is a thousand pities you should think you have got anything to do with my concerns. Leave me alone, that’s a good child. I’m past any mending of yours.’

She still knelt by his chair, gazing, as if she would have forced the secret of his wild, unhappy nature to show itself. Perhaps she thought of the happy dark days she had read of, when holy women, by dint of fasting and prayer and faith, could master even such savage souls as Otho’s—could cast forth devils, and so relieve the souls of wretched men. Those days must be past, for she could gather nothing from her searching gaze. Perhaps she was not holy enough. She had

prayed, but she had not fasted; and to judge from Effie's chatter, she had renounced none of the pomps and vanities of her station.

'You will be all right at the Dower House,' Otho resumed presently. 'Then you can have people to stay with you, and make yourself a little less dull. There! get up, don't look so desperately sentimental. I am as I am; and I shall get along, if you'll leave me alone.'

With that, he rose and put her aside, but gently and quietly; and she was almost sure that the hands which rested for a moment on her shoulders, quivered a little.

Otho went into the smoking-room, shut the door, and turned up the light. He took a brandy decanter from a case of spirits which stood on the sideboard, and poured some into a glass; and this time there was no question as to his hand trembling. His lips, too, were unsteady. He drank the brandy, and muttered to himself—

'I must go and see Magdalen, or she will be suspicious. But not to-night—not to-night. Surely to-morrow will do. What was it she said to me that night about wronging her?'

He threw himself into a chair, and tried to collect his thoughts, and shape a coherent recollection of Magdalen's words. At last he had gradually pieced them together, and with them the scene in which they had been uttered—the great square, draughty vestibule before the Balder Hall door; the north-west storm wind screaming past it; his own figure, and that of Magdalen; the way in which they had stood close together, and the vows he had forced from her; and how at last she had put her hands upon his shoulders, and looked him straight in the eyes, and said that she did not claim any vows from him, but only bade him remember that whatever wrong

he did her, directly or indirectly, from that day forth, he did to his wife, for that he was hers, as much as she was his.

‘Well,’ he thought, as he laughed a feeble echo of his old blustering laugh, ‘it would not be the first time a man had wronged his wife either ; but I shan’t. I shall tell the little baggage not to make a fool of herself, but to keep her languishing eyes for her bear of a lover.’

Otho, as he made these reflections, was thinking of no one in London. His sister had taken it for granted that he came straight from his sojourn with Gilbert Langstroth,—a very great mistake, as he had driven that very morning from Friarsdale to Darlington, and taken the train thence to Bradstane.

On the following day some kind of an interview took place between Otho and Magdalen. Eleanor saw very little of the other. They were amicable when they met, but nothing more. The day after that Otho went into Friarsdale, not saying that he was returning there, but simply that he was going. Eleanor was thus again left alone, and as soon as her young visitor had returned to the Vicarage, she began her preparations for removing to the Dower House.

One day, in the course of these preparations, she had cause to go into the shop of Ada Dixon’s father. Mrs. Dixon herself came forward to serve her. She was, as usual, stout, pompous, and important-looking, had on a superfine gown, and a cap which struck Miss Askam as being ridiculously young and small for her. Mrs. Dixon wore it with an air, as if it had been a coronet, which added to the absurdity of the spectacle. Eleanor had never liked this woman, whose hard eyes and want of simplicity and directness had always offended her ; and

she liked not the air with which she now came forward. But that it was (thought Eleanor) absurd on the face of the thing, she would have considered the glance bestowed upon her by Mrs. Dixon as an insolent one. It was at least hard, bold, and supercilious. Not thinking it worth while to betray that she had even noticed this manner, Eleanor made her purchases, which were set aside for her by Mrs. Dixon in lofty silence. While she sought in her purse for the sum with which to pay for the things, she inquired—

‘How is your daughter, Mrs. Dixon? I have not seen her lately.’

‘Thank you, Miss Dixon is very well.’ (Eleanor repressed a smile on hearing Ada’s mother speak of her thus.) ‘She is not at home just at present. She’s staying with some friends in Yorkshire—in the Dales—some relations of Mr. Dixon’s.’

‘Oh yes. In which of the Dales?’

‘Wensleydale. My husband’s cousin has a place there’ (a large farm would have been the correct description), ‘near Bedale, it is.’

‘Oh, I hope she is enjoying herself.’

‘Oh, very much, thank you. She’s very much sought after—sixpence you will want, I think—and they visit a good deal amongst the neighbours.’

‘Yes? And Mr. Camm? I hope you have good accounts of him?’

‘I really haven’t heard anything about him lately,’ said Mrs. Dixon, in an indescribable tone, as she poised the fingers of both hands on the counter and looked out of the window, as if she thought the interview had better come to an end.

‘Ah, I suppose Ada will be the person to get news of

him. I was so glad to hear he had done so well, and got such an excellent situation at Leeds. Ada will like to live near a large town like that, I should think.'

'Well, yes—perhaps. Perhaps not,' said Mrs. Dixon, with a glacial reserve, and then with crushing mysteriousness—'There's no saying where Ada may end, or what she's born to. She is not a common girl, by any means.'

'I hope she will end in marrying Mr. Camm, and making him a very good wife. He is a first-rate young man, and deserves to be made happy,' said Eleanor, nettled by the supercilious tone in which Roger's future mother-in-law spoke of him.

'Oh, he's a very worthy young man, I don't doubt,' came the rejoinder; 'a little rough, and wanting in polish—hardly the genteel manners one could desire.'

'No, not very genteel, certainly,' said Eleanor, hurrying a little in her desire to be able to laugh at leisure over the complaint that Roger Camm's manners were not 'genteel.' Indeed, they were not. If gentility were the desideratum, they were deplorably wanting, and likely to remain so.

Going up the street she suddenly met Michael Langstroth, and could not help telling him the joke, her eyes dancing as she spoke.

'Mr. Langstroth, do you know that for years you have cherished as your brother a person—I can call him nothing else—whose manners are not genteel. At least, Mrs. Dixon says they are not,—not as genteel as she could wish in her son-in-law—and she ought to know.'

Michael looked at her searchingly for a perceptible time, before he replied—

'At last you have heard something that has made you

laugh,' said he. 'I am delighted, and Roger may congratulate himself on his want of gentility, if it leads even indirectly to that good result.'

'Why—how—what do you know about my laughing?' she asked, crimsoning.

'Nothing, except that you don't do it often enough. I wish I could give you a prescription, but there is none for the ailment that is want of mirth; none in all the pharmacopeia.'

She took her leave of him, and walked away. No, she thought; the herb that brings laughter is called hearts-ease, and for her just now it grew not in Bradstane.

CHAPTER XXXII

FIRST ALARM

ONE day, very early in May, Michael Langstroth wrote from Bradstane to Roger Camm in Leeds:—

‘A strong sense of duty alone induces me to trouble you with a letter, for there is literally no news to tell you. When was there ever any in Bradstane? And just now we are duller than usual, for nearly every one is away. People (the few who are left here) talk now off and on about the Derby, and speculate whether Crackpot will win. He is not the favourite, as of course you know, but takes a good place. I daresay I hear more of that kind of thing than you do. The British Medical people meet in Leeds this year. Of course it won’t be till August, but I have every intention of going; and putting up with you; and I look forward to it as if it were some wild dissipation. It is, at any rate, too good a chance to be missed of hearing and seeing something, and getting one’s blood stirred up generally. I often wonder I do not turn into a mummy or a block of wood. On reading this you will probably leap to the rash conclusion that your account of two political meetings, and their consequent excitement, has roused my envy and upset my tranquillity, and that in future, you had perhaps better not supply me with such stimulating food! I beg you

will not cherish any such delusion. Your account of the meetings was most interesting and amusing ; but as you know, I have a great contempt for all political parties in the abstract, and to see a vast body of men, swayed like reeds by the passion of the moment—groaning like demons when they hear one set of names, cheering like maniacs at another, falling like living storm waves upon any unfortunate wight who dares to express dissent from their views, and hustling him out—is to me a melancholy spectacle. You would doubtless say, that without such passions and prejudices to be worked upon, things might be at a standstill. I suppose they might : all I know is, I am very thankful that there are so many men in the world that my indifference makes no difference. You will wonder whence this sermon arises. I have been meditating a good deal lately o' nights ; having felt tired when I came in, and not having had your music to govern my meditations, as in days of old. And I was thinking, only last night, of a dispute we used to have in our younger days, about life and events. I always maintained (quite wrongly, I confess now) that you got no real *life*, no movement, stimulus, animation, outside of a big city : you vowed that, on the contrary, it is the nature of the man that determines his life, and that dramas and tragedies as full of terror and pathos as Shakespeare's own might be played out within even as narrow a compass as the township of Bradstane-on-Tees, provided the actors were there, and that they lived, not played their parts. You wereright, and I suppose you hold the opinion still ; but this is what I want to know—how often is it that one gets the chance to live ? Most people would answer, once at least, in a lifetime ; and there it is that I totally disagree with them. Mine is a small stage

from which to preach, but I have seen as many people as some who live on a larger one, and I have observed them and their conditions carefully. And, because of my profession, the people I have seen have been of all sorts and conditions, and the conclusion I have come to is, that most lives are filled with emptiness—with a dead, dull uneventfulness. Action is for the favoured few ; culture for a great many more, if they choose to avail themselves of it, which usually they don't ; monotony for most.

‘That brings me back to my own life, and its monotony. Let me try to collect a little gossip for you, and free myself from the reproach of having sent an essay, unredeemed by a single touch of narrative.

‘Otho Askam is away. He has scarcely been at Thorsgarth since the new year. Just now he is busied, they say, about this precious horse which is to run this precious race. His sister’s house, too, is empty just now. She was persuaded, Mrs. Johnson tells me, to go and see her friends in London for a time ; but is coming back before Whitsuntide, as, in the kindness of her heart she is going to feast some little ragged wretches out of Bridge Street, whom she has taken under her wing. But it is not Whitsuntide yet. It falls near the end of May this year. I feel in a communicative humour to-night, so I will tell you a secret. My life is monotonous to me, as I believe I have set forth already at some length ; and I wish with all my heart that Eleanor Askam had not a fortune of twelve hundred a year ; for if she had nothing at all, I would humbly ask her if she would condescend to relieve that monotony of my life. I should also have the feeling that I could in a measure pay her back in kind, by alleviating, as I would, some of the sorrow that darkens hers.

‘I believe I had something else to say to you. I am almost certain that I sat down with a distinct impression that I was going to write to you about something. Oh yes, here it is. I suppose you hear regularly from Miss Dixon, and so, of course, you will know that a little while ago, she returned from her long sojourn in Wensleydale. I heard she had gone there for the pure air and all that, and because her father’s relations wanted to have her, and because she did not feel very strong at the end of the winter. You know, I have always thought her a very delicate girl, but now—I do not think it right to conceal it from you—she looks very ill indeed. Her cheeks have fallen in ; her face is pale ; she is the shadow of what she was. I hate to write this ; in fact, I was so unwilling to write it, that I scribbled all the rubbish which premises it, in the hope that, somehow, I might get out of this ; but I cannot. It would be no friend’s part ; and what blame would you not have the right to put upon me, if I let it pass by without telling you. She is very ill, I am certain. If I were on different terms with them, I should go to Mrs. Dixon, and tell her she ought to have advice for her. I keep wishing they would summon me, or Rowntree ; for they surely must see themselves the change in her. I fancy she ought to go to a warmer climate, or rather, she ought never to have gone to Yorkshire. That part of Wensleydale where she was, is piercingly cold—worse than this. It is in a valley, but the valley itself is very much elevated. I do not want to make you more uneasy than is necessary. We must recollect that this is the “merry month” of east winds, bronchitis, and pleurisy, and many a delicate girl withers up during May and comes out blooming again in June. Let us hope this is such a case. Sleep takes possession of me ; therefore, good night !’

This letter had veritably been written in the way described in it. Michael had beheld Ada, and the change in her; and as Roger never, in any of his pretty frequent letters, mentioned any rumour of the illness of his betrothed, his friend reluctantly came to the conclusion that he knew nothing about it, and that to leave him in such a state of ignorance was utterly impossible for him. All the first part of his letter he had written ramblingly, half his mind occupied with a wonder whether he could not absolve himself from the moral necessity which he felt upon him, of speaking about Ada. He could not, and the result was the composition above, which was written on a Wednesday night, and despatched on a Thursday morning. Michael did not expect any immediate answer to it, but went about his business, as usual.

On the said Thursday morning, near the Castle, he met Ada Dixon. There was, indeed, a piercing east wind blowing, and the girl wore a common-looking fur cloak, with which her father had presented her at Christmas, and of which she had been proud, in that in shape and fashion it bore a faint resemblance to the costly garments in which Miss Wynter and Miss Askam were in the habit of wrapping themselves on cold days. Perhaps the dead black of the cloak showed up her pallor still more strongly by contrast; but as Michael met her—he was on foot, going to see a patient who lived beside the river-bank; she ascending a little hill, slowly and wearily, and he going down it—with her face a little upturned, and the flickering light quivering upon it through the leaves—her white hat and her fair hair,—as he met her thus, her appearance was almost spectral in its whiteness and fragility.

She inclined her head to him, and would have passed on. But he stopped, and held out his hand to her.

‘Good morning, Miss Dixon. You must not think me meddlesome, but when Roger is not here, I consider you a little bit under my care ; and my duty obliges me to tell you that you are not looking so robust as is desirable. Have you been catching cold ?’

He was surprised at the effect of his words. Ada’s white face became in a moment angrily red ; the colour rushing over it in a flood. Her eyes flashed, and in a voice that was sharp with irritation, she said—

‘Nothing ails me at all. I’m as well as I can be, and I think there’s no call for you to make such remarks, Dr. Langstroth.’

‘I am sure I beg your pardon if I have offended you. I assure you there is nothing I less wish to do. I am very glad if you do feel well. Only, I wish you looked stronger—that is all.’

‘What do looks matter, when one feels perfectly well ?’ said Ada.

‘There is certainly a good deal in that. Good morning. I will not detain you.’

He raised his hat, and was moving on ; indeed, he had walked a pace or two, when Ada’s voice, just behind him, caused him to turn again. She looked embarrassed, and half stammered, as she said—

‘Oh, please—do you know—have you any idea when Miss Askam is coming home ?’

‘I have not,’ said he, gravely, and very much surprised. ‘At least, I know nothing of the exact day ; but before Whitsuntide, Mrs. Johnson says. She would know, I daresay, if you like to call and ask her.’

‘Oh, thank you ! I’ll see. It’s—it’s not of so much

importance,' said Ada. 'Good morning, Dr. Langstroth.'

They parted. Michael went on his way, and as he went he shook his head.

'It is not of the least use for her to tell me that she is perfectly well. She is very ill indeed, and something ought to be done for her.'

Many times during the day he thought of Ada, and of her changed looks, and wondered how Mrs. Dixon would take it if he spoke to her about her daughter.

About seven o'clock, just as he was sitting down to his solitary dinner, his dining-room door was opened, and Roger Camm walked in.

Michael uttered an 'ah!' of pleasure and relief when he saw the mighty figure lounge into the room.

'You here, Roger?' he said, jumping up and grasping his hand. 'Was it my letter? Did you take the alarm?'

'Ay! I could not rest another day without coming to see that child. She scarcely ever mentions her health; indeed, never; so it never occurred to me that there could be anything the matter with her.'

'Then, my dear fellow, you must prepare yourself for a very disagreeable surprise, that's all. But have some dinner now, and you can go down and see her afterwards.'

Another place was set for Roger, who made a praiseworthy effort to eat his dinner, and to talk as if nothing had happened. He could, however, scarcely sit out the meal, and the instant it was over he rose.

'I've come to you feeling sure you would put me up, Michael. I've got what they call in Leeds "the week-end," and must go off again by the late train from Darlington on Sunday night.'

‘Of course you will put up here, and I’ll drive you into Darlington on Sunday. I suppose you’ll go out now?’

‘Yes. Don’t expect me back till you see me,’ said Roger, going away; and directly afterwards, Michael heard the door shut after him.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BROKEN OFF

DESPITE that cutting east wind, it was a glorious May evening. The trees and fields were coming on grandly, and the sun shone dazlingly towards his decline, in a heaven of bright blue and gold, with piles of glorified clouds in a steady bank to the north. The beams shone slantingly all on the old brown houses, and their rays were flashed back from the windows of the quaint old sleepy town. As Roger walked down the street, his heart beating with foreboding, he was but vaguely conscious of the stir of life around him, the murmur and bustle of those whose day's work was done, and who were enjoying their pipes, their gossip, and their games; for in one part of the town the youths played quoits in an open space, while many reverend elders looked on, and made sententious remarks as the sport progressed. He was conscious of receiving here and there a greeting; he returned them vaguely, and went on his way, and presently found himself within Mr. Dixon's shop, which looked very mean and low and small, and which seemed quite filled by his tall and broad figure. Mr. Dixon was alone in the shop.

‘Bless my soul, Roger—you!’ he exclaimed.

‘Yes,’ replied Roger. ‘I got a couple of days’ holi-

day, so I thought I'd run over and see Ada. Is she in ?'

'Yes, she's in. You'll find her upstairs at her piano. The wife has gone out to tea. And look you, Roger,' he added, drawing the young man aside, and lowering his voice, though they were alone, 'Ada has got uncommon twiny and washed-out looking, and has taken to singing the most sentimental songs. I declare it makes me feel quite low in my mind to hear her constantly wailing and wailing. Try to cheer her up a bit.'

'That I will !'

'I daresay she's just fretting a bit after you.'

Roger's heart bounded, and fell again. It could not be so. Ada knew she needed not to fret after him. But he said, as cheerfully as he could—

'I'll go upstairs and find her.'

With which he went through the shop into the passage, and quickly up the stairs. As he ascended, the 'wailing' of which Mr. Dixon had complained became distinctly audible. It was a very, very mournful song that Ada sang, and Roger's heart died within him as he heard it.

He opened the parlour door softly, and looked in. The piano was opposite to the door ; therefore Ada, seated at it, had her back turned towards him. She had ceased to play within the last minute, and sat very still, with her hands, he noticed, dropping down at her sides, in a way that had something very painful and hopeless about it. His heart went out to her, and as she did not at first appear to notice any sound or any footstep, he walked softly up behind her ; but not so softly, big and heavy as he was, and unused to treading gingerly, but that she could hear him distinctly ; and he noticed that

she suddenly drew her hands up, and that they were clenched, and that her shoulders heaved, as if she drew a deep breath—not as if she were surprised, Roger thought, hope beginning to beat high in his heart again, *but rather as if she were very glad.* She knew, then, that he was there. She recognised his footstep, and she was moved, deeply moved, by his presence.

He laid his hands upon her shoulders, and said, softly and caressingly—

‘Ada!’

She faced him, with the quickness of lightning, and with a veritable shriek,—it was too loud, too affrighted to be called an exclamation—and Roger recoiled before the expression of the face which was turned towards him. He literally fell back a step or two, gazing at her alarmed and speechless, while she put her hands, one to either side of her head, and shrank together, staring at him with a look of terror and amaze.

‘Ada, my love,’ he began at last, alarmed and bewildered by the contradiction between her manner before she had seen him, and that manner now that she beheld him. Then she found her voice, and rose from the music stool.

‘Roger, Roger!’ she gasped. ‘How can you! Stealing up behind one, and startling one in that way! It’s enough to turn the head, if one’s a nervous person.’

‘But, my darling, I saw that you heard me,’ he began; but she burst into hysterical tears, turning away from him, and flinging herself upon a sofa, so that he saw it was useless to attempt to explain or apologise. Once it crossed his mind, ‘She behaves almost as if she had expected some one else.’ Then he put the idea aside, as we do put ideas aside which we know would be

absurd in regard to ourselves, often without stopping to make allowances for the differences in others' minds and our own.

It was a very distressful scene. Nothing that he could do or say restored calmness to her, though the first violence of her agitation presently wore off. In vain he tried to wring from her some explanation of her altered looks, her nervous terrors; asked her what ailed her, and tenderly upbraided her with not having told him she was out of health. Ada would own nothing, say nothing; and when he rather pitifully said he had hoped to give her a pleasant surprise by his unexpected arrival, she replied with irritation that she hated such surprises; he ought to have written or telegraphed. In fact, Roger, with the deepest alarm, presently saw that his presence was doing her no good, but harm; it was perfectly evident that he had better retire, and he decided to do so. But before going, he said—

'Now, look here, Ada. Grant me a very great favour, and I'll not tease you about anything else. Let Michael Langstroth, or Dr. Rowntree, see you. Rowntree, perhaps. He's such a kind, good old fellow. He would give you something to strengthen you.'

'I am not ill,' cried Ada; and she stamped her foot on the ground, and clenched her teeth. 'I will see none of your doctors. I hate them, and I'll have nothing to do with them. You will *make* me ill, if you don't let me alone.'

Every sign warned Roger that this was a subject it would be best not to pursue any farther, and he presently left her. He had no heart to go into the shop again and speak to Mr. Dixon. Slowly and dispiritedly he made his way back to the Red Gables, and found

Michael there, astonished to see him back again so soon, and looking the questions he felt he would not ask.

‘I don’t know, Michael,’ said Roger, in answer to this look. ‘There’s something awfully wrong. I must see her father to-morrow. She denies that anything ails her, but at the same time she goes on in such a way as no one would who was all right. It is not the end—I know it is not the end.’

On the following day it seemed as if the end, so far as Roger was concerned, had arrived. In the forenoon Mr. Dixon made his appearance, and asked to see Roger. Then, slowly and with difficulty, he unfolded the fact that Ada had summoned him to her after her lover’s departure, and had told him that she could never be Roger’s wife; that her life was a misery to her, so long as she was engaged to him, and that if her father wished to see her well and happy again, he was to take this opportunity of telling Roger so, and of making him understand that she did not wish to see him again.

The stout, prosperous tradesman looked pinched and miserable as he told his sorry tale; while the young man sat opposite to him, his face turning very white, his strong hands shaking, and his mighty figure trembling all over, like a leaf in the wind. The sun was shining outside, though not into the room; one could see its glare in the yellow hue of the grass, and the shadows cast by the trees. The sound of singing birds came in at the open window, and also a blast of north-east wind, cold, dry, cutting as a knife.

‘She does not mean it, Mr. Dixon; she does not really mean it?’ he stammered, fighting for his life.

‘She means it, Roger. I wrestled with her about it for an hour; for with expecting you to be my son for so

long, I've got to look upon you as if you were my son. I wrestled with her till I saw she was nigh to fainting, and then I had to stop. She pulled this off her finger, and told me to give it you.'

He pulled a little pearl ring from his pocket, and pushed it across the table towards Roger, without looking at him. Roger picked it up, and turned it round in his fingers as if he did not know what it was—as if the sight of the little jewels dazed him.

'She said she wished to send no unkind words, for that perhaps she'd never see you again; but that you must not come nigh her, for another scene with you would kill her, and she wants to live.'

'Let her live then,' said Roger, in a hoarse and laboured voice. 'It does not matter what becomes of me.'

Mr. Dixon, sturdy philistine that he was, wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

'Roger,' he said, with a solemnity and strength of conviction which gave dignity and something like majesty to his commonplace, outside man, 'you have just cause to look upon my girl with suspicion, and to fight shy and speak ill of us all. But, lad, I tell you, we don't know the end of it all yet. I can tell you, my heart is heavy. There's a weight on it, as if something uncommon was coming, or hanging about in the air somewhere. I can't mind my business, nor eat my victuals, for thinking of that girl, that looks like a ghost; and why, that's what I want to know—why?'

'I'm afraid,' said Roger, in a laboured voice, but instinctively trying to give comfort to the man who was older and weaker than himself, 'that she may have begun to care for some one else, who perhaps doesn't respond

as she could wish. If so, it is best for her to be free from me.'

'Choose what it is, it's a heavy trouble for us all,' said Mr. Dixon, wearily. 'I'm often afraid that she was brought up with notions far above her station,—Miss Wynter, and all that; but somehow, I never took it to be anything seriously wrong. . . . You'll not look upon me as an enemy, Roger, for I've fought for you through thick and thin?'

'An enemy—God forbid! I know you have been my friend all through.'

'We are going to send her away,' pursued Mr. Dixon. 'She has asked to go down to my sister in Devonshire, a widow, who has often wanted to have a visit from her. She says, if she gets away from all this ('all what?' thought Roger, a thick dread at his heart—'her home, her friends, her natural life, with all its hopes and interests?'), once away, she thinks she'll be better. So we shall send her. I won't stay. I've dragged myself here, and I shall drag myself back again. Can you shake hands with me, my lad?'

Roger unhesitatingly gave him his hand, went with him to the door, and saw him walk away; then returned, to try and understand the meaning of what had befallen him. He was surprised to find that after a time, instead of reproaching Ada, even in thought, he was occupied in trying to recall any occasions on which he might have spoken harshly to her, and in mentally imploring her to forgive him his trespasses, and in wishing that he had but the chance to do it in so many words; while his sense of the mysterious terror that hung over her grew greater every moment. He did not leave Bradstane earlier than he had intended. A great calm and a great

pity had settled upon his soul. He found himself able to speak freely to Michael of what had happened—to tell him more of his inner thoughts and feelings than, in all their long intimacy, he had ever divulged before. He told Michael what Ada was going to do, and he said—

‘When she comes back, for my sake, Michael, you will pay a little heed to her, and let me know how she looks, at any rate.’

‘You may trust me to do it.’

‘It is all quite over between us. I have a feeling that that is quite certain; but I don’t feel as if we knew everything yet. And God forbid that I should judge her in the dark. A girl doesn’t carry on as she is doing, either from lightness of mind or hardness of heart.’

This was as Michael drove him along the lanes to Darlington to catch the night train. Michael said nothing. Friendship demanded that what Roger required of him in this matter, he should do, whatever he might think of the cause of his friend’s distress.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOW CRACKPOT WAS SCRATCHED

THEY left the dogcart outside the station, and Michael went in with Roger to see him off. As he stood beside the carriage window, waiting for the train to start, Roger, leaning out, said to him in a low voice—

‘I haven’t forgotten what you said to me, Michael, though it looks as if I had—what you said in your letter about a certain lady.’

‘I did not suppose you had forgotten,’ replied Michael, gravely and simply; ‘but I think you had better do so. Consider that I wrote it in a fit of momentary weakness of mind. Indeed, if I could have borne to write the last part of the letter over again, I would not have sent the first, when it came to the point.’

‘It is safe enough with me; but I can’t quite see why you should call it weakness. Look here, Michael, we both know how that lady is situated, and you say you wish she had not got twelve hundred a year of her own. Take my word for it, if she knew that, she would curse her money. Don’t go to suppose that I have not eyes in my head, and ears to hear with.’

They had clasped hands, and the train had begun very slowly to move. Roger went on rapidly—

‘I hoped at first that you never would care for her,

when I began to see that she attracted you. Now I believe she is the woman to make you happy, as you are the man to do the same thing by her. Go in, and win, Michael, and never heed what the black things about her may say. Good-bye, old friend, and luck go with you.'

There was a hard pressure of the two hands, which then had to be unclasped. The train glided out. Michael was left upon the platform, looking after it. When it had disappeared, he went outside again, found his dogcart, gave a coin to the boy who had held the horse—for he had brought no servant, wishing to have Roger to himself on the drive; and now he set off on his return journey.

When he drove out of Darlington it was after eleven o'clock; there was a radiant full moon hanging in the sky, and the whole land was flooded with its beauty and its brilliance. The roads, after he had got out of the town, were solitary and silent, as country roads, late on a Sunday night, are wont to be. He had all the beauty, all the glamour of the night to himself, and it sank into his soul, and the words which Roger had uttered resounded in his mind, like a refrain. He did not drive very fast. He was in no mood to tear along, but was rather disposed to taste to the full the cup of beauty and graciousness that was offered to him. One by one, he drove through the chain of exquisite villages which make that road one of the most beautiful in all England,—Coniscliffe, Piercebridge, Gainford, and Winston, arrived at which place, for the sheer pleasure of the farther drive, and the enjoyment of the pure night air, and the magic of the scene and the hour, he turned off, instead of pursuing his way straight, to one side, and took the

roundabout and surpassingly beautiful road which leads through Ovington, and past Wycliffe Hall and wood, and its ancient little church of solemn beauty, and so across Whorlton Bridge to Bradstane. Every inch of the way was beautiful. And that which lent the greatest charm to it was the river, which, ever as he drove, he had near him. Now he lost it; again it gleamed suddenly on his sight, emerging unexpectedly into the open, from some deep wood, or rushing in a sweeping curve into view; now sunk between marly banks, now making its way 'o'er solid sheets of marble gray.' Grand old Tees! thought Michael, paying it a parenthetical tribute, in the midst of the many other thoughts which just then crowded his mind, and made the long drive seem to him a short one; where was it to be matched for beauty and stateliness, and natural grandeur, and wild, unbounded variety? How different here, as it flowed on steady and strong, from what it was as it came, little more than a fierce, brawling mountain stream, tearing over the wild moors near its source! It had been his friend and companion through many a weary year, as he had gone his rounds, wide and long as the valley itself. Like all such friends, ungifted with the deceitful power of human language, it had always had the very voice that suited his mood. In his youth, no longings had been too high, and no hopes too feverish for it to encourage. And for ten years, since he had been a veritable man, it had been his constant guide and associate. In spring it rushed joyfully along, singing a song of encouragement; in summer its cool surface and the soothing murmur of its flow had many a time made tolerable the burden and heat of the day. He had heard its autumn roar, and in wilder moods had ridden races with it; and he knew its aspect

in winter, gray and sullen, or even iron-bound almost all its length, from mouth to source; in its smoother expanses covered with skaters, or laden with blocks of ice, which, when the thaw wind began to blow, split and parted with reports like explosions, and then went sailing in beautiful glistening blocks towards the sea.

Just now, in this May moonlight, at the hour which was neither night nor day—for midnight was past—it fulfilled its spring vocation; and as he drove along, its murmur swelled out into the night, and held out promises—promises so brave and high that he mistrusted them almost. And yet, a voice in his heart told him, with an unerring whisper, that he might believe these promises; that if he went and asked Eleanor Askam to confirm their truth, she would do so. The knowledge thrilled him; it was pungent—half-bitter, half-sweet. It gave him a new sense of youth, a conquering confidence to which he had long been a stranger. He rejoiced in it, and rejoiced greatly all the while that he shook his head, and said within himself ‘impossible,’ and repeated that he wished she were not so rich—so much richer than he was. If anything should happen—some transitory misfortune, by which she might for one moment feel herself quite poor, and believe she had no resting-place for her head, and he the next moment might bid that dear head rest where it should ever be welcome—on his own heart—ah, Bradstane town and the cobble-stoned streets, the Red Gables and reality!

On the following day he heard that Ada Dixon had gone to stay with her father’s widowed sister, at some remote Devonshire village. The sister had been house-keeper to a great family in the neighbourhood; had married the butler, and was now living partly on the

fruits of her own savings, partly on a pension from the said family.

‘Poor Roger!’ reflected Michael. ‘If the girl were something very wonderful, or very gifted, or marvellously attractive, one could forgive such connections. And there’s no harm in poor old Dixon; but as for the others—no, they are not suited for him.’

The little bit of gossip and talk caused by this second visit of Ada Dixon to friends at a distance, following so rapidly upon her return from a first absence, had had time to die away, and the middle of May had arrived, when Michael became aware that his new neighbour, Miss Askam, had returned from her sojourn amongst her friends. The Dower House showed signs of life; the windows were filled with pots of flowering plants, and one or other of the little Johnsons began to be frequently seen on the doorsteps, while the Thorsgarth landau came round every fine afternoon, and was driven into the country with Miss Askam and one or more either of these little Johnsons, or their hard-worked mamma, or Mrs. Parker; for the young lady seemed to have no pleasure in solitary state drives. Sometimes, on his rounds, Michael met her, and then there was a bow on his part, and a secret thrill of delight, and perhaps some of the power he felt showing in his eyes; and a gracious inclination, an irrepressible brightness overspreading her face, on her side. A week or ten days passed, by no means ungenially, in this way, till the Derby week arrived.

On the Monday morning Michael was amazed to receive a note from Eleanor.

‘MY DEAR MR. LANGSTROTH,

‘I wonder if you would think it very

troublesome to come and tell me, if by any chance you *should* hear anything about my brother's horse, on Wednesday. I am most anxious to know, and thought perhaps you might know people who will have telegrams about the race before Thursday's paper comes. I shall not see that till the afternoon, you know.

‘Sincerely yours,

‘E. ASKAM.’

Michael, as she conjectured, had means of gaining information before Thursday's London paper made its appearance. He wrote to the secretary of a certain club at Darlington, desiring him to telegraph to him any news of ‘Crackpot,’ at as early a date as possible. He was both astonished and disturbed to receive a telegram on the Tuesday night, and its contents were not too soothing to his feelings. Thinking it best to get the business over, he went straight to the Dower House, and was admitted to Miss Askam at once.

She looked astonished to see him, and he perceived that her brightness was gone. There was a look of worn and harassed anxiety, and of nervous restlessness, too, about her. Her hands trembled, and her eyes wavered.

‘Miss Askam,’ he was beginning, but she interrupted him.

‘You have got a telegram. Something has happened. I knew it. I had—I was certain of it. What is it,—because I know the race is not yet run? Is anything the matter with Otho?’

‘This telegram,’ he began again.

‘Please let me read it. I cannot wait.’

He handed it to her silently, and it fluttered in her hands as she perused it;—

'Crackpot scratched. No end of a row.'

'I do not know what that means,' she said, tremulously. 'Scratched—will you please explain.'

'It means,' said he, reluctantly, 'that your brother has withdrawn his horse at the last moment from the race; and from the last part of the telegram, I am afraid there must be an impression that—that——'

'That he has not dealt honourably,' she said, quickly and breathlessly. 'I want to know a little more, please, Mr. Langstroth. Is it not usual to withdraw a horse in this way?'

'No. At least, it is a great pity when it has to be done. It is particularly a great pity that your brother should have had to do it the first time a horse of his was running. Some men do it pretty often; and then, you know, they get a bad name, and are not considered——'

'Honourable. I understand. But will he have done it without any reason? Can you say, just at the last, "I have changed my mind, and my horse shall not run?"'

'Most likely it is given out that Crackpot is ill, and unfit to run. Nay, it may be that he is so. Do not distress yourself about it,' he added, eagerly. 'I will find out all that I can about it, and let you know. Everything will be uncertain now, of course.'

She was still standing by the table, looking at him with haggard eyes, and as he spoke thus, she shook her head.

'No, no!' said she. 'Just once, while I was in London, I happened to be at a regatta, with my friends, and Otho was there too. And I saw a disagreeable-looking man come up to him, who did not know I had anything to do with him. They talked together for a little while, and I did not hear what they said, till

suddenly the man said, "But mind you, Askam, none of your tricks. You are a slippery customer at the best." I felt so indignant that I turned round quite angrily; and then he saw that I knew Otho, and they laughed, and moved a little to one side.'

'I don't see that that incident has any necessary connection with this,' said he, quietly. 'You can do nothing, you know, Miss Askam. Do not distress yourself needlessly. To do that is to render yourself powerless when any real emergency arises.'

'Yes, I know,' said she, and paused. He looked at her, and saw that she looked worn and anxious.

'Is there anything else I could do for you?' he began. 'Because I should be so glad——'

'No, thank you, nothing, except to promise that should you hear anything more about the thing, you will let me know.'

'That I certainly will,' said he, and rose to take his leave. 'You still remain amongst us, in Bradstane,' he observed, gravely, but kindly, as he held out his hand.

'Yes,' said Eleanor, with a quick flush. 'I do not wish to go away. I—I intend to stay here.'

'Always?'

'I think—always.' She spoke steadily, but did not look at him.

'I am very glad to hear that,' replied Michael, quietly. 'Now I know you are strong when you choose to be so. Will you promise not to fret foolishly over this thing—not to brood and mope over it; or else I shall be sorry I complied with your request?'

'I promise to behave as well as in me lies,' said Eleanor, smiling.

‘Then, good evening.’

He went away thoughtful. He knew perfectly well that she would have to hear more disagreeable things about Otho before very long, but he had succeeded in lulling her fears for the present, at any rate.

CHAPTER XXXV

‘CARELESSE CONTENTE’

THE withdrawal of Crackpot from the running, on the very day before the race, made a great sensation in the world of the turf. The affair was looked upon with suspicion, especially in connection with Otho Askam's known character for slipperiness—a character which stuck to him, although no one could exactly say how he had first got it. But the sensation was very much confined to the circles immediately connected with the event. Otho had managed with sufficient skill to avoid having anything tangible brought up against him. The rumours that were current did not penetrate to his sister's ears. The things that were written about the circumstance were published in sporting or ‘society’ papers, which she never saw, and in their own peculiar jargon. Michael, in his rounds, heard it all freely discussed, but was careful never to let her know what he heard. He wished her to forget it, and presently it seemed as if she did. At her age, and with her temperament, the heart, though it is peculiarly sensible to sorrow, and feels it with a keenness resembling resentment, is also very open to joy; and there were joyful influences at work in her life that summer. Michael did not even tell her of the rumours he had

heard, that Otho had lost a great deal of money by withdrawing Crackpot from the race ; for after all, they were rumours, and not substantiated facts, though Michael believed them to be true enough. Otho had what Michael considered the good taste not to come near Thorsgarth after his escapade, and for a season the land had rest from him and his presence.

It has been said that there were joyful influences at work in the life of Eleanor this summer ; and that was true. Her nature loved sunshine, and just now it had it in plenty, both moral and material. From May—after the bad news about Otho—till August, sunlight prevailed. There was a long, hot, glorious summer, such as is not often vouchsafed to us nowadays. Hitherto she had known Bradstane literally only under its winter aspect. These months offered a variety of view and climate ; and she, keenly and intensely sensitive to such influences, rejoiced with the rejoicing summer. Her life at the Dower House just then was a far from unpleasant one. She had gathered round her a little circle of friends, both young and old, and they gave freshness and variety to her life, as she helped to bring charm and poetry into theirs. She began for the first time really to understand what pleasure money can give—the possession of it, that is, and the power which that possession confers of affording pleasure and relief to others. She helped to make the summer golden to others beside herself. Amongst the pleasures of that season, there were none she enjoyed more than the out-of-door life which the unusual fineness and dryness of the summer rendered possible. There were day-long excursions, begun early in the morning, and only ended when the dew and the night were falling together—excursions into the deep

woods, over the glorious moors, or beside the lovely streams which water and adorn that wild and beautiful tract of Borderland, called Teesdale. Sometimes she and her friends, the little Johnsons, would set off alone, swarming (the children) in and out of a pony chaise which never seemed too small, however many got into it; and which was yet never too large, even when there were not more than two or three to occupy it. As often as not the old doctor would be their guide and chaperon; and under his direction they explored the country for miles around. It was new to Eleanor; it was mostly new to her young companions, who had never before had a fairy with a pony chaise to take them about. This was very pleasant, with the lunches eaten 'by shallow rivers,' or under leafy trees; when the children splashed and waded to their heart's content, and the days, long though they were, never seemed long enough.

But there were also other and larger affairs, more important in every sense of the word,—proper picnics, at which several parties joined,—the Johnsons, Dr. Rowntree and his sister, Mrs. Parker, Eleanor; and on one or two occasions, even Michael had managed to snatch a day and join them, leaving his work to his assistant. On one of these days when he was present, they explored Deepdale; on another they managed to climb 'Catcastle Crag.' On both of these occasions it was noticed that Michael's behaviour was marked by an unaccountable levity, and Miss Askam's by a kind of laughing apprehension. She, too, seemed to see jokes where no one else could detect them. Michael, indeed, went so far as to tell the children that this was not the first time that Miss Askam had been to Catcastle, and having by means of sundry mysterious hints roused their

curiosity to fever pitch, and set them to attack her with every kind of question they could think of, he fell into the rear, and conversed with Mrs. Parker, leaving Eleanor to baffle them as best she could.

They happened to be alone for a few moments on the occasion of the Deepdale expedition, and he seized the opportunity to say—

‘I notice that you still retain that ingenuous youth, William, for your special body-servant; I suppose it is his complete incapacity which recommends him to you? You do not like to dismiss him, because you are quite sure no one else would take him on; and you think it is better that he should have the semblance of an occupation than that you should have to support him by charity.’

‘You wrong poor William, Mr. Langstroth. He is a very good servant, and a most faithful creature.’

‘So I should fancy. He knows the country almost as well as his mistress does, and has such wonderful presence of mind, as to make him invaluable in any emergency.’

‘Well, I think he has the presence of mind, at any rate, to know when help was nigh.’

‘Say, rather, the power of lung to invoke that help when it was afar off. You don’t know what a long way I rode back, summoned by that unearthly yell of his.’

Eleanor laughed. ‘Poor William!’ she said.

‘Ah, I do admire William. Do you see, he knows we are talking about him, and the children are beginning to be suspicious too. I believe William fears we are going to ask him to act as guide to some place. Would you mind my catechising him a little on the geography of the district? It would keep him up to the mark, you

know, and would be such a useful thing for the children as well.'

'Please don't, Mr. Langstroth. You will make me look ridiculous before them all.'

'If I have seen you looking ridiculous, and if William has seen you looking ridiculous,' said Michael, 'as we certainly did, you know, on a never-to-be-forgotten occasion, what can it matter if a set of children and their mother see the same thing?'

'Oh, nothing, perhaps,' was the sweet reply. 'But are you sure you did not look a little ridiculous too? And if Effie once had her confidence in your infallibility shaken——'

'That is true. Like the villains in novels, you have a power over me, through the innocent ones whom I love. I will keep silence this time, but take care how you provoke me too far.'

'Do not be so childish.'

This was very frivolous nonsense, and they enjoyed it, as they enjoyed the hot summer sun, the cool streams, the shady woods, and even the fun they had in combating the swarms of wasps which usually followed them in these expeditions, and entirely frustrated their efforts to sit down, and, as Effie plaintively said, 'eat a meal in peace.'

Once, deeper feelings were touched, and this was on a day when they had penetrated farther than ever before; and on this occasion, too, Michael was with them. Setting off very early, they drove in the morning coolness to Middleton-in-Teesdale, and thence onwards to High Force, where they rested and lunched; after which they drove onwards to some little huts at the edge of the moor, where path ended, and wilderness began; when they got out, and walked for a mile and a half to the wild spot

where Tees comes first winding, sluggish and sinuous, over the moor top, in what is called the Weel, and then suddenly precipitates himself madly over 'Caldron Snout,' tearing down an incline of two hundred feet to the lower level, where he pursues a brawling way towards High Force, his next descent.

This is a very wild and desolate spot, and requires intrepid walking to get to it; plunging through the thymy moor, rough, pathless, and uneven, without guide, save for rough wooden posts like crosses, planted at intervals of several hundred yards, to show the directest way to the cataract. But so few persons visit Caldron Snout, so few tourists or picnickers care to be at the trouble of penetrating to it, that no road has got beaten out. Nature seems to sit enthroned in undesecrated queenliness in the fastnesses around the cataract.

It was a day that Michael and Eleanor never forgot. The children, literally frantic with the novelty and the wildness of the thing, and with the exhilarating moorland air, tore about in all directions—over heather and thyme, bluebells and boulders. Now came a scream of joy, and a mad rush to Michael or the doctor to ask the name of some hitherto unknown plant or flower—as the delicate autumn gentian, or, on some grassy banks, the poetical looking fragile 'grass of Parnassus.' Anon, wonder, quite awed and hushed, and treading on tiptoe to peep into a nest concealed beneath the grass, and containing five dirty-white eggs, with wine-coloured splashes on them. Then on again, to fresh fields and pastures new, till one wild whoop announced the discovery, in its steep hidden gorge, of the waterfall itself.

The elders walked more sedately, rejoicing with joy more cultivated, if not more intense, in the larger grand-

ness of great, sweeping lonely fells, of miles of purple heather; and in the abstract impressiveness of such a solitary torrent as Caldron Snout.

It was as they were wending back towards their vehicles, in the evening, that Michael and Eleanor found themselves alone. The children were scattered, making the most of what time remained to them, for the collection of interesting natural objects. Mrs. Johnson, with an eye to her rockery at home, had stopped in front of a patch of fine bog-plants, and had made the doctor go on his knees, armed with an old table knife. She was standing over him, directing him to the finest plunder, perfectly deaf to his assurances that the fine purple pinguicula which she coveted could find lovely flies here for its sustenance, but that its poor carnivorous leaves would most likely shrivel up and die in the dark corner of her garden, devoted to the cultivation of ferns and house-leeks.

At some distance from these two Michael and Eleanor stood side by side, facing Mickle Fell, and gazing at the noble sight unfolded for their delight. Many a time Eleanor had seen this grand old mountain in the distance, overtopping his comrades, always; but now he rose straight before them, apparently not a mile away. They were both struck by what they saw. The great Fell, who seemed to spring aloft from the smaller ones which clustered about him, formed a centre and a focus to the picture, rising in a blunt, massive kind of point. His huge and grim sides were clothed in a violet veil of summer haze and heat, like a garment such as no earthly hands ever fashioned. This was beautiful; but it was not all. The sun stood, at the moment when it seemed to rest exactly on the midmost point of his summit, a

blazing golden ball, and rays streamed away from it on every side, so that Mickle Fell seemed veritably to wear a crown of glory, surpassing all the crowns and all the jewels of all the kings in the whole world. Just at the moment, the stillness was utterly unbroken. Not even the murmur of the torrent reached them, nor the voices of the children 'playing in the light of the setting sun.' Earth seemed to hold her breath while one of her great hills received the crown and the benediction of the closing day. No hum of booming bee, no voice even of any bird, broke the dead silence; nor did these two venture to disturb it, but gazed and worshipped, and felt that even if they lived to be very old, they would not often see the heavens declare the glory of God so sublimely as at this moment.

And it was but for a moment; such scenes seldom last longer. Suddenly things seemed to change; the glory became dimmed; sounds became audible; the spell was loosed; and with one deep sigh both their hearts confessed it, as their eyes met.

Perhaps they both understood at that moment, though all that Michael said, was, 'I am very glad that we have seen that—together.'

'So am I,' she rejoined, softly.

Then suddenly, almost at their feet, broke forth a gossipy, importunate, 'Brek-kek-kek!' and behind them children's voices shouted. They smiled. The awe and the solemnity had gone, but the joy remained and was abiding. It did not die away, even after the sun had set and the golden rays were quenched in night. It made itself felt all through the long drive home through the darkling lanes, and it breathed out of the delicious scent of the firwoods, beneath which part of their road

lay. It looked out of the eyes of both, as they clasped hands and parted after it was all over.

That was the last of some cloudlessly happy days. It was, in reality, the first day of Michael's summer holiday, and he knew it would be the best. On the following morning he set off to Leeds, where that year the British Medical Association had its annual meeting ; after which, he and Roger were going to take a short country tour together.

One evening, in August, soon after Michael had gone, Eleanor was startled to see Otho walk into her drawing-room, looking ill and haggard. He threw himself into a chair, gave a long kind of sigh, and asked her how she did.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SHADOW

It seemed as if, when Otho came in, joy went out. Eleanor, as she viewed his sinister figure, and saw his haggard countenance, felt a chill steal over her in the midst of the August warmth. It was like the first breath of winter, sent as a warning when autumn days are mild and life delicious.

‘You have come back at last, Otho. Are you going to stay at Thorsgarth?’

‘Just for two or three days. I’ve been there and put up my traps, and I meant to stay there, but it is such a dismal hole. It makes me creep all over. I could not stand it, so I thought I would look in upon you.’

‘I am glad you did,’ she said, wondering a little why he had chosen rather to visit her than Magdalen. But she did not ask, and he did not mention the subject. He did not stay very long. She asked him if he came from London, and he said yes. She did not ask him about Gilbert. She had nearly forgotten him. The strength of the love she felt for Michael had effaced almost the recollection of the uncomfortable days she had passed during Gilbert’s Christmas visit, and the fears she had felt with regard to him.

‘I thought you would be coming before,’ she said,

‘for the shooting. People are saying it is something unheard of for you to be without a party at Thorsgarth just now.’

‘People may mind their own business. It doesn’t suit me to have a party. I can’t afford.’

‘Are you poor, Otho? Have you been losing money?’

‘What a question to ask! If you inquired whether I’d got any money left to lose, it would be more to the point.’

‘I am very sorry to hear it. Are you going already?’ For he had risen.

‘Yes, I arranged with a fellow to meet me at home at eight, and it’s nearly that now.’

‘I shall see you to-morrow?’

‘I shall be busy in the day, but at night—yes, I’ll come and dine with you, Eleanor. What time?’

‘Seven, Otho; but come as soon as you like, and I’ll invite Magdalen to spend the evening too.’

‘Magdalen!’ He looked startled, as he had done on a former occasion, and not too well pleased. Then he said, with an attempt at indifference—

‘Oh, all right. That will be the best way.’

He departed, and as it was not too late, Eleanor sent a note by that night’s post, telling Miss Wynter that Otho was over, and would dine with her the following evening. Would she (Magdalen) join them and spend the evening?

Magdalen sent a man the next day with her acceptance of the invitation, and Eleanor awaited her two guests with the feelings of one who is heroically going through a most disagreeable duty.

It was the end of August, and on quiet, cloudy days it was twilight by seven o’clock. Just before that hour

Eleanor had occasion to go into one of the front rooms ; —her dining and drawing-rooms were at the back, looking upon a pleasant garden and orchard, and the front rooms were small ones, separated from these others by folding doors.

She got what she wanted, and then paused for a moment beside the window, looking out upon the street, which was gray with the dusk, and the houses over the way did not show very clearly. No one was about except, as Eleanor noticed, a woman, whom she had seen earlier in the afternoon, in another part of the town ; an itinerant singer, who had been going from door to door, singing ballads and collecting money. Eleanor had noticed her, and had been struck with the decency of her appearance, and the unusual quietness and modesty of her look. She had told her servants, if the young woman came to her house, to take her into the kitchen, and give her a meal. This had been done, and the girl now seemed not to intend to sing any more. She had been going about bareheaded ; now she had put on a small straw bonnet, and placed a woollen shawl about her shoulders. She stood near the doorsteps, and looked this way and that, as if not certain in which direction to go. The window was open, and Eleanor was about to throw it still higher up, and suggest to the young woman where she might find a lodging for the night, when quick steps approached from that side of her own house at which she stood. Then a man's figure, in a light summer overcoat and a round hat, appeared ; it was Otho, and he had one foot on the doorstep, when the young woman turned, and began rather timidly—

‘If you please, sir——’

‘Good God ! what do you mean !’ he exclaimed, in a

voice in which both fear and anger struggled. 'Have you no more——'

'Sir!' exclaimed the young woman, facing him fully, and in evident astonishment, 'I was not going to beg—I——'

'Confound you!' burst from Otho's lips, and his voice trembled, with what emotion Eleanor could not guess. 'You made me think—what do you want, loafing about here?'

'I am doing no such thing as loafing,' said the young woman in high dudgeon. 'I am a respectable woman, and I was going to ask you a civil question—that's all. But I'll go farther on, now.'

She turned away, indignation quivering in her every movement. Otho stood still a moment, Eleanor noticed, as she breathlessly watched and listened, with his hand resting against the door pillar, as if to support himself. And she saw that he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow; and she heard something muttered between his teeth, and then the words, 'cursed hole like this!' Then he came into the house, for the door opened from the outside, and she mechanically went out to meet him, disturbed more than she would have cared to own. For whom, for what had he mistaken the young woman, that he should show such alarm and such fear?

He was standing in the hall, having laid his hat upon the table, and was pulling off his overcoat. His face was quite white, or rather, gray, and his eyes looked wild and startled.

'Halloa!' said he, evidently with an effort—at least, it was evident to her now that she knew what had gone before. 'How are you? Has Magdalen come?'

'No. I am expecting her every minute,' she replied.

‘Ah, there are the carriage wheels. She is here now.’

Otho was now master of himself again. He waited in the hall till Magdalen had come in, and received her, looking into her eyes with a sort of eagerness, and kissing her as he looked at her.

The evening proved, in a way, less depressing than Eleanor had expected. Magdalen was unusually sweet and gracious; Otho more genial and expansive than his sister had ever seen him. Magdalen openly and unreservedly put questions to him about his affairs and intentions, which Eleanor would never have dreamed of asking. He was not very explicit as to his business, but said it was business that brought him to Thorsgarth, adding with candour that nothing else would induce him to set foot in the place, for he had got a horror of it. From some hints that he let fall, the two young women gathered that his stables and stud were to come to the hammer—when, he did not say. Also, that he was at present somewhat straitened for any considerable sum of money. But he did not hint at any wish to borrow money, or receive assistance, only saying that Gilbert would see him safe through present difficulties, and that the Friarsdale stables would bring in ‘a pot of money.’

‘I’m going to Friarsdale to-morrow,’ he added, ‘and back here the same night. The day after, I’m off again.’

‘Are you? Where?’

‘London first. Then Paris, I expect. I’ve got some business there,’ he condescended to inform them, ‘in connection with the *Grand Prix* next spring.’

‘Racing again!’ said Magdalen. ‘But you’ve got no horse in it.’

‘Yes, but I have. I’ve Crackpot again.’

‘*Again!*’ repeated Miss Wynter, with emphasis and meaning.

‘Oh, it’s all straight this time. You need not be sneering, Mag; and Eleanor need not turn up her eyes in that lackadaisical fashion. When Crackpot has won the *Grand Prix*, as I intend him to, I shall sell him for—well, a good lot of money. Then I shall be fairly on my legs again. Thorsgarth may stay as it is, yet awhile, and the timber can remain in the woods.’

‘I should hope so!’ exclaimed Eleanor, in a voice of alarm.

‘And if you’d only marry me now, Magdalen, out of hand, you should have the purse-strings, and keep me in order. Come, let it be a bargain!’

Magdalen’s eyes glittered. It was a bargain she would have clinched that moment if she could.

‘You know it is utterly impossible, Otho, now. But if you’ll come home again before Christmas—well before Christmas, you know, I might be able to settle things.’

‘Oh, do promise, Otho!’ Eleanor urged him eagerly. ‘If only you and Magdalen could get married at the end of this year or the beginning of next—why, you might go abroad; and when you had got this money that you speak of, you might live abroad.’

Her heart leaped up at the idea that Magdalen, if she once had him in hand, and was as he said mistress of the purse-strings, might have a strong influence over him, and that, having broken from his sporting associates, both here and in London, something different—something a little better, might surely be made of him.

‘If you would marry him, Magdalen,’ she went on, ‘I would spend the rest of the winter myself with Miss

Strangforth, if she would have me ; or you could find her another niece to come and live with her.'

'I would do my best,' Magdalen said, 'if he'll promise to come home before Christmas.'

Otho h'md and ha'd, and said at last, he could not promise more than she did. He would do his best too.

'It would be very nice,' Magdalen said, reflectively. 'Bradstane is dull to the carnally minded. People given up to good works and acts of mercy, like Miss Askam, may find it bearable. I think it is awful. And there is hardly any one left in it now. All my old friends are gone. You away, Otho ; Gilbert away ; Roger Camm gone.'

'Camm lives in Leeds now, doesn't he ?' asked Otho ; and there was something in his voice as he spoke—an inflexion, a shade, which caused Eleanor to glance at him quickly. But he looked as usual, except that he was still haggard and worn-looking, and appeared indifferent about the answer.

'Yes,' said his sister. 'He has a very good post there.'

'What has become of that little girl he was going to marry ?' asked Otho ; and Magdalen gave a little laugh, saying—

'Well, that is good, I must say. After the way you behaved to her——'

'What ?' stammered Otho, and there was the same look on his face that Eleanor had seen there as he stood in the hall just before Magdalen's arrival.

'He pretends not to know,' said Magdalen, mockingly. 'It is not a hundred years since there was a concert in the Bradstane schoolroom, sir.'

And she laughed her measured, cold laugh.

'Oh, bah !'

‘Ada Dixon was very much out of health, and was sent away into Devonshire into a warmer climate,’ said Eleanor, gravely. ‘She has been away all the summer, and has not yet returned.’

‘Ah!’ said Otho, stifling a yawn. ‘I used to see her in former days, going up and down the village, and going to see you, Mag——’

‘Yes. You put a stop to that by your behaviour that night. After that it was impossible for me to have anything more to do with her.’

He laughed.

‘I never saw anything of her this time, so I thought she might have got married to some one, and cleared out.’

Neither his sister nor Magdalen saw how, as he spoke, he looked sideways at them. Magdalen was opening and shutting her fan. Eleanor had some trifle of fancy work in her hands.

He did not stay much longer, but had some talk with Magdalen at the door before he went away. He did not wait till Miss Strangforth’s carriage came, nor offer, as on a former occasion, to see her home. Magdalen returned to Eleanor when the door had closed behind Otho.

‘He is really exasperating. He will not give me his address now; says he is so uncertain: I must write through Gilbert, as usual. I declare he grows more and more mysterious. One might almost think he had some reason for wishing to conceal his whereabouts,’ Magdalen went on, reflectively. ‘Suppose one wanted to get at him suddenly, in any emergency, and everything had to be done through Gilbert. It might be most awkward.’

She spoke with entire tranquillity of mien and voice, and stood before the looking-glass over the mantelpiece,

arranging the flowers in her corsage, with drooped eyelids and leisurely fingers. It was evidently a purely imaginary picture that she drew. But Eleanor looked up sharply, remembering what she had witnessed that very evening. Magdalen, however, was no person to whom she could disclose her vague and shadowy fears. There was nothing for it but silence. She gave a troubled sigh.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE RETURN

WITH Otho's absence and silence, the uneasiness and the fears which he seemed to bring with him, like so many invisible but potent attendants, gradually died away and were lulled into serenity. The great house was closed. The Thorsgarth shooting was let, so Eleanor heard. She never went near the place, and heard nothing of it all. Her own life was sweet to her just now, and full of hope. The most beautiful season of the year floated by like an ideal, a dream of peace and of calm, yet ample life.

It would be almost impossible to imagine anything more beautiful than the aspect of Teesdale—especially of that portion of Teesdale—in the months of September and October—when they are fine and seasonable that is, and bring such skies, such winds, and such suns as are due, in these two most gorgeous months of the year.

In this particular season they were all that could be desired, and our lovers—for lovers they were, though no explicit word of love had ever passed between them—enjoyed their glory to their heart's content. Eleanor was satisfied that Michael did not speak to her; the spell of the present time was so delicious that she would not have had it broken. She had forgotten outside

troubles and difficulties ; she only felt that all was well, and that a happiness awaited her in the future, so great that she could well afford to wait for it.

September sighed itself out in golden glory, leaving a luxury of ripening tints on every tree, filling the tangled hedges with many-coloured flames of dying weeds ; for, as every one knows who lives in the country, the smaller plants that grow in the ditches and near to the ground—the wild geranium, the smaller hemlock, or that plant which is akin to it, the rose-bushes, the hawthorn, and wild guelder rose—these are the things that ‘turn’ first, these the objects on which autumn first places her crimson finger ; and then, when she has embellished the hedges, and is pleased with the result of her handiwork, she becomes bolder, mounts higher, attacks the trees—the oak and the beech first, the sycamore and the ash following in their turn. Then it is that the river gains his stronger voice, and rushes along, ever more tumultuously. Then it is that o’ nights the air is keen, and that at that hour which has said good-bye to afternoon, and is not yet evening, there is a strange, metallic, lambent light in the sky, a light which seems also almost to crackle and sparkle in the very atmosphere, a magic, unearthly light, which has its charms for those who love to study nature in her more obscure phases.

It was on a glorious, crisp afternoon, a little beyond the middle of October, that Eleanor returned to the Dower House, after driving about a bevy of little Johnsons the whole afternoon. She dressed herself then, and went to dine and spend the evening at the old doctor’s house. After dinner Michael came in. He seemed lately to have enjoyed an unusual quantity of leisure in

the evening hours. The talk turned to books ; amongst other books to a book of poetry, some passage in which was disputed. Eleanor said that she had the book, and would go across to her house and fetch it. Upon this Michael announced that he should convey her across the square, and had gone as far as the door of the doctor's house with her, when his old friend, who was in his library, called to him, hearing his step.

'Go to him,' said Eleanor. 'I will fetch the book, and return to you.' And she walked quickly across the square to her own door.

Arrived there, she found a woman's figure standing, in an uncertain attitude, near it. Something—a nameless chill, an unspeakable dread, took possession of her. She did not speak, but paused, looking at the figure, her mind disturbed with vague recollections of Otho's last visit.

'Miss Askam!' said the loiterer, in an uncertain voice.

'Yes ; who is it?'

'It is I—Ada. I wanted to speak to you.'

'Come in with me, then,' she replied, but felt all the time that she was inviting some great terror and woe to enter her house.

She opened the door, and led Ada into the drawing-room, turned up the light, and looked at her ; and as she looked, the words were frozen upon her lips at the aspect of the figure before her. Had not the voice said, 'It is I—Ada,' she would scarcely have recognised this countenance. Ada wore a large, thick, woollen shawl, falling loosely about her ; and a small hat, from under which showed a face which had aged by twenty years, and which was not only aged, but seamed, furrowed, worn with lines of what must have been mortal anguish,

seeing that every one of them had been stamped in less than five short months. The pretty, delicate, meaningless face was clean gone : in its stead there was a mask, betraying a mind devoured by misery ; eyes which looked at once hard and frightened, hunted and yet defiant—the eyes of an animal at bay ; a countenance to fill the most indifferent beholder with horror.

Struck literally speechless, Eleanor stood, her hand on the table, and stared at the figure with wide open eyes, while she felt cold and terror seize every limb. What did this apparition want with her or hers ? A sickly dread, a kind of dim first suspicion of the meaning of it all crept into her heart.

‘Miss Askam,’ said this spectre of Ada Dixon, in a low and husky voice, ‘I’m in trouble.’

‘Yes,’ almost gasped the other.

‘I’m come to you, since it was no use writing to your brother. Where is he ?’

The tongue of Eleanor at first clave to the roof of her mouth ; at last, in a hoarse voice, she asked—

‘What have you to do with my brother ?’

With a swift motion, Ada unfastened the pin at her throat ; her shawl slid from her shoulders to the ground, and she confronted Eleanor.

Trembling overpowered the latter. Speech was at first denied her. She could stand no more, but crouched upon a chair, and gasped out—

‘Oh, horrible, horrible !’

Suddenly a wild gleam of hope crossed her mind. Why was she assuming the very worst to have happened ? By what right did she condemn not only Otho, but Ada ? She sprang up again, went close to the girl, and almost whispered—

‘Did he not marry you?’

‘Marry me!’ repeated Ada, in a fearful voice of bitterness, scorn, and despair. ‘Nay, he only swore he would, again and again.’

‘And—and——’ she shivered still. ‘And when was this?’

‘It was in March,’ replied Ada, with stony composure. ‘When I was staying in Wensleydale, and he was in Friarsdale, and he met me every day, and said he’d never cared for anybody else. I’ve written to him—a hundred letters. He has never answered one. I thought he was at home now; I heard so. I came to tell him he must—to shame him, if I couldn’t persuade him; and now . . . he’s not here. No one knows . . . where he is.’

With an hysterical sob she sank together in the corner of a couch.

‘In March,’ Eleanor was repeating to herself, with mechanical calm, and clenching her hands, to keep herself still. ‘March—and this is October. There is yet time.’

That was all she could think of at the moment. There was no time, no possibility for anything else. Her brain felt wound up to this emergency, and to nothing more. She walked up to Ada, and touched her.

‘Your parents—what do they know?’

‘Nothing,’ said Ada, in a dull, colourless monotone. ‘Mother is away, or I dare not have come home. Father is away for the night. He’ll be back to-morrow: he will find out . . . he will turn me out of doors. Oh, Miss Askam, save me, save me, save me!’

‘Hush!’ said Eleanor, quietly. ‘Let me think. Some one must have known—the people you were staying with—your aunt?’

‘She would keep me no longer. I put her off by tell-

ing her that he was coming down there to marry me—that he'd sent me there to wait for him. I said it all depended on her keeping silence ; that was why she let me stay so long.'

'At what time will your father be back?'

'At eleven to-morrow morning, they said.'

'You will go home now, and stay there all night. At nine o'clock to-morrow morning come to me. I shall have had time to make arrangements then. I will see your father. I do not think he will turn you out of doors. If he does, you shall come here. I will send for—my brother. I think I can make him come. I do not wish to seem harsh to you, but you must go home now, that I may have time to arrange things. You will go to your room at once, when you get home. You understand—you can say you are tired. Try not to be frightened,' she added, bending over Ada, who was crouched in an attitude of blank despair ; 'because I can shelter you, and I will do so, as God is above us. I promise you this. Now go.'

Slowly Ada rose. Eleanor felt afraid lest she should break down before she had left the house. But she did not. She submitted to have her shawl pinned on again, and with the same look of utter, vacant despair, walked away.

'Either it will turn her brain or kill her,' Eleanor felt, as the girl departed, and she sat down at the table, and rested her head on her hands, and tried to put away the recollection of the awful figure she had seen, and to reflect upon what must be done. But she scarcely had sufficient power yet, over her emotion, to be able to reflect. She could only remember, and shudder, and feel horrified, while all kinds of wild speculations darted through her

mind, as to the effect the event would have upon this person, and that person ; and, above all, she wondered how it was that it had never for one moment occurred to any of them that when Ada was in Wensleydale, and Otho in Friarsdale, they might easily have met. In fact, she could think of nothing but of the thing itself, and the crushing, the overwhelming horror of it, except that every now and then a thought crossed her mind that something must be done at once, and that there was no one but herself to do it ; which thought reduced her to complete powerlessness.

While she sat in this chaos of thought and emotion she heard a knock at the door. She said nothing ; she had forgotten all about the little things that one remembers at ordinary times, and after a moment, while she still sat, unheeding, it was gently opened, and Michael Langstroth looked in.

‘I have been sent to fetch you,’ he had begun, and then he came to a dead stop, as he saw and comprehended her strange attitude ; and when, at his voice, she raised her head and looked at him, he beheld her face, and knew that since she had quitted them, a quarter of an hour ago, something terrible had happened to her. And he knew that moment—he did not in so many words state it to himself, but he knew it—that it was to him she would appeal for help. He was glad of that, but he was sorry that he had let the days go by in a dream, and had not given her the right to come to him, without thought and without question.

Eleanor, as she looked at him, felt at first a little bewildered. So overwhelmed was she with what had passed, that it was a moment or two before she actually realised who he was.

‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,’ says the Psalmist, ‘from whence cometh my help.’ And, in a certain degree, it was so with her. A voice supreme and unerring spoke to her; all her nature, every fibre seemed to bow to an overwhelming intuition which directed her towards the man who stood before her, looking so earnestly down upon her. She loved him, and that with a love which had grown into a great passion, and an absorbing one. But it was something different—something deeper and higher than even this great love which impelled her action now;—instinct, some might call it, and others say that she had naturally a gift for reading character correctly, and for discerning which persons were, and which were not to be relied upon. She herself would have said that God inspired her. She sat motionless for a moment, bending to this inner voice which spoke to her, acknowledging what her belief told her was the providential arrival of the one person whom she would most implicitly trust—and fighting down the unwillingness—natural and good in itself, but which she felt it was useless to stand upon now—to speak openly of such things as had happened, to a man who was neither her husband, her father, nor her brother. And then, her resolution taken, or rather, that importunate inner voice obeyed, she got up, and leaning over the table towards him, said—

‘I want to know if you will help me in a very great trouble?’

‘With every power that I have, I will help you,’ he replied, unhesitatingly, and waited to hear what it was that he had to do.

‘Since I came in I have heard of a thing that has happened. I hardly know how to tell you of it. It

makes me feel as if I had been laughing and amusing myself in some room, underneath which another person was being tortured to death.'

Her lips were parched ; her eyes dilated.

'If I did not trust you *entirely*,' she said, as if she appealed to him, 'I could not tell you.'

For a moment she was silent, while Michael waited, and then, turning to him again, told him, unfalteringly, of the discovery she had made, and repeated, word for word, the conversation between herself and Ada. Michael listened in perfect silence ; it was, he felt, the only way in which to hear such a tale.

'I have sent her home,' Eleanor said at last, 'that I might try to think. She is safe for to-night, since she says her mother is away, and her father will not return before eleven to-morrow. I have told her to come here early—at nine to-morrow morning. I thought I would keep her here till her parents knew. I think her father has a heart, but I cannot endure that woman, her mother. I feel that she would rail at her—not because she had done wrong, but because she had failed in getting married to Otho.'

He nodded.

'Do you think I have done right ?'

'Perfectly right. There was nothing else to be done. Do you know where—he—is ?'

He spoke as if he found a difficulty in finding a term by which to speak of Otho.

'No, I do not ; but your—Mr. Langstroth knows all about him. He gave me his address at Christmas, and I have kept it. It is through him we shall have to send. . . . It is now clear to me why Otho would not give his address to Magdalen.'

‘I see. The thing is, suppose he does not choose to answer the summons—your brother, I mean. You say she said she had written to him?’

‘A hundred times, she said, and received no answer.’

‘That looks very much as if he had chosen to desert her entirely, and did not intend to notice any demand. I fear he will not come if we send for him.’

‘I do not know that. I think he may. I have an idea in my mind. I will tell you why I have it, afterwards. Since you told me what his besetting sin was, I have watched him carefully. He does what he feels inclined to do, and leaves the results to chance. I have seen it in a thousand things, great and small. I can tell no reason why he should have committed this crime—his heart is black—I do not understand such things. But I believe that when last he saw the girl, he did not know of this, and that he was tired of the caprice, and afraid that her letters might tell him of some such thing; so he has never read them, but trusted to his god, chance, that they did not tell him what he did not want to hear. I saw him burn a thing one day, without opening it. Your brother asked him why he did that, when he knew it was a bill he would have to pay. He said he knew nothing till he had read it.’

She also told him of the episode she had seen between Otho and the young woman who had been singing.

‘The expression on his face was fear,’ she went on, as coolly as she could. ‘I did not understand it then. Now I do. It was dusk. He could not see the figure properly; he feared to meet Ada; he thought for a moment that it was Ada, come to accuse him of his sin. All the time he was here he must have been haunted by the fear that she might confront him. His questions to

us about her, were for a blind ; and I think he wanted to get some news of her, without seeming to seek it. As we told him nothing, he chose to behave as if there were nothing to tell. This has all come into my mind since I have seen Ada. Perhaps I am wrong ; but if I am right—and I believe I am, and we send a message to Mr. Gilbert Langstroth, Otho will know what it means, and will come.'

'Could Gilbert have known ?'

'No, no, no !' she exclaimed, vehemently. 'I will stake my life on it that he did not.'

'I think your theory may be quite right, up to a certain point. You may be right as to the past, that is, for that would be quite consistent with his character. But I doubt your sanguine anticipations being correct. I doubt his coming, if we send for him. Suppose he is out of England, and refuses to come ; because it would be so much easier for him just to leave her to you, or to herself, or to her fate.'

'There is some little time yet. If he does not answer, I will go to him where he is, and make him come. I will so speak to him that he shall not dare do anything but come. I will die, but I will force him to make what miserable reparation lies with him. He is poor now,' she added, with a peculiar smile, such as Michael had never seen upon her face before. 'Before very long, he will be a pauper. I know it. He will be dependent upon me. I have understood that for some little time past. But if he does not come home and marry Ada, I will let him die of hunger in the street, rather than give him a penny.'

She did not speak noisily nor vehemently, but Michael saw that she was quite prepared to carry out her words.

‘Then you have a strong hold upon him,’ he said. ‘Now, what we have to do, is to telegraph to Gilbert. We can, of course, have an answer from him to-morrow. By the way, it cannot go before to-morrow. Then we shall know better what to do. If you will give me pen and paper, we can perhaps agree together what to say.’

Eleanor brought the writing things, and after various false attempts, they decided to send :—

‘Send O. A. here instantly, on a matter of life and death. Not an hour to be lost. If he is not near, send information how he is soonest to be found.’

‘I will see that it goes first thing in the morning,’ said he. ‘And you say Ada is coming to you?’

‘Yes; at nine.’

‘That is well. She could not be in a better place. Do not leave your house yourself. I will see Mr. Dixon. There is no necessity for you to trouble. Try to make her talk to you about it; do you understand? It will be better for her than anything. It may save her life and her reason.’

‘Yes, I will do so. Do you think I should send for her here to-night?’

‘No, I do not. It would excite the curiosity and suspicion of your own servants, and the tale would be over the whole village long before morning. I shall be obliged to tell them over the way, though,’ he added, ‘because it might be just possible that Gilbert’s reply might make it necessary for some one to go up to town, to settle things more expeditiously. I might go up alone; or if you went, I would go with you—if I may.’

‘If you may!’ she repeated, in a faltering voice, ‘What could I have done without you!’

‘Another time,’ said he, looking straight into her eyes,

‘I will tell you something. We have other things to think about now. Be as tranquil as you can, and remember that you could have done nothing but what you have done.’

He wrung her hand without saying anything more, and left her.

They had searched their hearts to find what was the best to do in this terrible emergency, and being at one on the point they did it. The time in which to decide was short, and they did not know the whole extent of the woe about which they were, as it were, legislating. Perhaps they tacitly agreed that the nature which had endured so long could endure till to-morrow morning. They knew not what were the principal factors in the sum of the events, in the midst of which they found themselves without a moment’s warning. Those factors were despair, and the promptings of a heart which had literally had all life and all reason ground out of it by seven months of perfect wretchedness.

Eleanor slept little that night, and waited with sickening anxiety for nine o’clock. It came, but brought not Ada with it. Half-past nine; yea, ten had struck, and she came not. Thrilling with uneasiness, Eleanor knew not what to do. She feared by making inquiries to excite suspicion. Unhappy and uncertain, she waited till about half-past ten. Michael called, and, without sitting down, just told her not to make herself more uneasy than was necessary, but that he had been at Mr. Dixon’s, intending to appoint a meeting with him on his return. His assistant said he had had a letter from him, deferring his return till the following day, and that the maid had told him that Miss Dixon had gone out, and up the town, without waiting for any breakfast.

Eleanor felt her heart in her mouth.

‘Has she gone out to kill herself?’ she whispered.

‘I do not think so,’ said Michael. ‘She cannot have wandered very far. You shall have news as soon as I can send it. There is only one road out of this end of the town, and I am riding that way. Good morning.’

So she was left alone, with the conviction that Michael himself was far more disturbed than he chose to tell her. Fears and terrors loomed up like giant shadows in the background of her mind, and so she passed the most terrible day of her life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ADA

ADA had gone home, after leaving the Dower House. The maid had told Michael that Miss Dixon had gone out about eight o'clock, in her bonnet and shawl, without any breakfast, and that she had had nothing to eat after her arrival at home. She had never, indeed, taken her things off; but was in exactly the same dress she had worn on her journey to Bradstane, which had been a long and fatiguing one. On going home from her interview with Eleanor, she went upstairs, partly in mechanical obedience to a remembered mandate of Miss Askam's, partly automatically.

She never undressed, or even lay down on her bed. Part of the cruel night she spent in sitting on a chair by the wall, staring with blank eyes into the darkness, and repressing, half mechanically, the moans that rose to her lips. Another portion of her vigil was consumed in a restless wandering to and fro. Her chamber was over the empty parlour. No one would hear or heed her footsteps. At last, finding the darkness unbearable, she struck a match, and lighted two candles which stood on the dressing-table, and gazed about the room. It was her own bedroom that she was in, and the bed, beside which she sat, was the bed in which Ada Dixon had

slept—the same Ada Dixon who had felt indignant and insulted when her plain-spoken lover had told her that no honest girl required notice from her superiors. How very angry she had been when he said it. At this recollection she held her hands before her mouth to stifle a shriek. In this room, before that looking-glass, how many hours had she spent, trying the effect of this, that, or the other piece of finery; endeavouring to model her bonnets, her hats, her mantles, and her gowns upon those of her patroness, Magdalen Wynter? In that desk, standing upon the little round table in the corner, how many notes might be reposing, indited by Ôtho Askam? Notes slipped into her hand under Magdalen's very eyes, when he had met her at Balder Hall; behind her unsuspecting father's back, when she happened to be in the shop. Notes containing at first nothing but a rather heavy style of compliment, adapted to a taste not over-fastidious in such matters; tragic effusions, when read by the light of this present; ponderously comic, if viewed critically on their intrinsic merits as compositions.

When had it first seriously occurred to her that she might become Mrs. Askam, of Thorsgarth? Why, on that night, a hundred years ago, when there had been a grand concert, at which she had sung—when Miss Wynter had been flouted, and Ada flattered and complimented.

That was the night Roger had come in in such a fury, and carried her away. Roger—Roger—her thoughts wandered—who was Roger, and what had he to do with her? They were engaged to be married once—now—yet—— Yes, and in November he was to come and see her.

Again a scream of wild laughter rose to her lips.

Again she managed to stifle it, and again her mind reverted, whether she would or no, to her horror, her nightmare, the history of the last seven months. She recollected how Otho had appeared one day at the farmhouse where she was staying, and had paid her compliments; how she, grown bolder now that Magdalen was not present to overawe her, had, in a perkish manner, chaffed him about his engagement; to which he had retorted that he was not married yet, and that engagements might be broken off; and had appealed to her admiring cousins to know if Miss Dixon would not grace any sphere, even the most exalted. She remembered the gradually arising passion in his looks and his words, and how she herself, by one of those mysterious attractions which we see daily exemplified, had found herself spellbound by him in a manner which Roger could never have compassed if he had died for it. Temptation, kisses, promises—such profuse promises, appealing with instinctive acuteness to her vanity, her love of distinction—the strange eyes which magnetised and fascinated her; a brief, delirious dream—and since then, hell, by day and by night; not from the sense of defilement which would kill some natures—but, let the truth be written of her; she has her compeers in many places—from the scorching conviction that if, or when, she was found out, disgrace and contumely would be her portion.

She recalled the parting from Roger—when she had dismissed him in the pride of her heart, at a time when hope was still strong; and though she was beginning to have sickening qualms, yet she had been deluded enough to mistake his footstep behind her for Otho's, and had had a wild idea that he had at last broken with Magdalen,

and was coming to save and to claim her. Then her departure ; the letters she had written, which had never been noticed ; her aunt's gradually awakened suspicions, and the tales she had told to stave off ruin and discovery ; her journey home in fluttering hope, and desperate resolve ; for a letter from home in which her father had expressed himself obscurely, had made her think Otho was at Thorsgarth. How she had made inquiries, and learnt that he had been gone a month or more. Then Eleanor, and her promises, and how she was to go and see her in the morning.

The night hours passed swiftly in this consuming vigil, and presently Ada saw that it was broad day, time, therefore, to go and see Miss Askam. That was her one thought now, that she was to go and see Miss Askam. And yet, her mind being more than a little wandering, she did not realise that though daylight, it was not yet the appointed time ; but went downstairs, and let herself out of the house. The maid was at work in the kitchen ; but she was a new-comer since Ada had left home, and did not therefore address her, or ask her any questions.

When Ada was out in the street she felt very weak and very strange, but she looked at a clock which stood over a public building, nearly opposite her father's house. The hands pointed to eight ; and then she remembered vaguely that Miss Askam had said nine ; she must not go before nine.

She would take a little walk then, in the early freshness ; she could not go back to that dreadful room. Besides, she had advanced a little up the town, into the square : there were Miss Askam's blinds still down ; it would not do to go there yet, though she longed to do

so, and, had she been in her right mind, would have knocked without further ado, confident in the generous charity of the other woman.

So she wandered on, out of the town, faint and feeble for want of food and rest ; crazy, and growing every moment more so, with woe, and fear, and wretchedness. Soon she was on a lonely road, stretching out to the north-east, with few houses, and, at that hour, scarcely a person on it. How beautiful it all was, in this golden morning sunshine, with the mists rising from the river, and the trees, clad in yellow and scarlet and russet, heavy and drooping in the windless air of a frosty October morning, precursor of a glorious autumn day !

Then she emerged from the shade of these trees, and found herself upon a wild upland road, with sweeps of country stretching far and wide around her ; fields of yellow stubble, pastures, meadows ; stretches of heavy wood ; here and there the gleam of the river, and on every side, the wall of blue fells in the distance. The rough, uphill road lay before her, with scarce a house to be seen ; and overhead a blue sky, from which fleecy white clouds were everywhere rolling back to show the fathomless, serene expanse.

‘Ay, but I’m so tired, so tired !’ Ada sighed, as she stumbled, and then recovered herself. ‘This is not being a lady ; why does he not come home ? If I had the carriage he promised me,—he said he would drive to Balder Hall with me, to see Miss Wynter, and show her what *he* thought of me, when we were married.’

Here she found herself opposite to a tiny house at the roadside, or rather, at a corner where four roads met ; and at its door a woman stood, saw her, called out to her, and wished her good day.

‘Good day !’ said Ada, with a sudden affectation of her old mincing manner. ‘ Might I beg a drink of water from you ?’

The woman, who was kindly, though rough, would have had her come in and have some bread and milk, but she would not. She had quite forgotten Eleanor Askam by this time, and said she had far to go, and must not wait. The water was bestowed upon her, and she stood to drink it, holding the cup with her right hand, while her left rested upon the table. The woman looked at her, and drew her own conclusions from what she saw. Ada thanked her, with an affectation of superiority and patronage, and left the cottage. Its mistress stood watching her, as she turned to the right, along a high, toilsome road, and marched slowly and heavily along it.

‘ Some poor crazy creature, whose hour is not far off. God pity her !’ she said within herself, and for a moment felt inclined to run after the girl, and insist on sheltering her. But the thought of her ‘ man,’ and the trouble he would feel it to have such a person in the house deterred her. She went inside again, to her morning’s work.

Ada crept on, till she saw at a little distance, gray farm-buildings and a whitewashed house, with a long, low front ; and it came across her mind that she could not walk any farther, but that she would go there, and ask them to let her rest till her carriage came, which was to meet her there, and take her home to lunch. And if they asked her who she was—why, the answer was simple—Mrs. Askam, of Thorsgarth. And in fancy, she saw curtseys dropped, and heard them begging her to be seated. For she was now quite crazy, only in this way ; the connecting string in all her wild thoughts, was the vague recollection of real promises.

Before she arrived at the farm, she swerved to one side ; her knees gave way, and in a little hollow in the wall, where there was a heap of stones, she sank down, feeling as if she were going to sleep ; but the sleep became a long, deadly faint, and Ada Dixon, the petted beauty of the old town where she had been born and bred, who had been the plighted wife of a good man, lay in a heap by the roadside, with only the broad sky above her, with nothing but her mother earth on which to rest her dainty limbs.

And here she continued to lie, till Michael Langstroth rode up, having made inquiries on his way, and learnt from the woman at the cross-roads, that such a young woman as he described had passed.

‘Ay, doctor,’ said the woman, who knew him, though not Ada. ‘She was none fit to be walking on such roads at such times. I wanted her to bide a bit, and rest ; but nay—she said she had far to go, and yon’s t’ rooad she took.’

Michael rode on, determined to find her, for Roger’s sake, for the sake of Eleanor, and out of his own pity for her condition. He was not long in coming within sight of the gray stone farm, and within a stone’s throw of it, the curve in the wall, and the figure that lay beneath it.

He muttered an inarticulate word, as he sprang from his horse, and stooped over her, and when he saw her face, recoiled for a moment. For a brief instant or two he could see nothing distinctly, a film was over his eyes, and a great sob in his throat, as he turned, and hung his horse’s bridle over the post of a gate in the wall. He then stooped down, raised the lifeless figure in his arms, and carried her over the rough road to the farm door. The dogs, who were his friends, came out to welcome him,

and then stopped, sniffing suspiciously at the skirts of the strange burden he bore. The farmer's wife saw him, and ran forward, with upraised hands, 'Lord 'a mercy, Dr. Langstroth—what is't?'

'Mrs. Nadin, you have promised many a time to do me a good turn; and I want a very good one doing now. Give a shelter to this poor thing till her trouble is over; it is a sad tale, and I'll tell it you afterwards.'

Mrs. Nadin made no more ado. Langstroth had, according to her, saved her husband's life two years ago, and with true north country love, she had been ever since burning to 'pay him back again.' She only stopped to look at the girl's face, and to ejaculate Ada's name. Then she called her daughter to her aid, and they whispered horror-struck conjectures to one another as they tended the wretched young woman.

And here, under the roof of these pitiful strangers, was that evening born, before his time, the son of Otho Askam—a child of sorrow, if ever one came into the world.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BROTHERS

It was late in the evening of the same day. Eleanor and Michael were alone together in her drawing-room. She had not been left alone all day. Unable to bear the solitude and suspense alone, she had sent for Mrs. Parker, who, of course, knew all the story from Michael. The good lady had come, and remained with her during all the hours of waiting and terror. When Michael was announced, Eleanor had said she would like to see him alone, and Mrs. Parker had gone into another room. He had come in, looking both tired and haggard; for what had happened had struck him, both through his friend, and through the woman he loved. Though Roger had now no connection with Ada, Michael knew him too well to suppose for a moment that he had, or could have, ceased to love her, in the space of five short months. The worst agony of separation might be over, but he could imagine what this news would be to the man who had loved this unhappy girl so tenderly and so faithfully. As for Eleanor, her sufferings were his sufferings now. And thirdly, there was himself and his own sensations in the matter. He had never admired Ada, and had always been sorry that she had been Roger's choice; but it had never entered into his head

to dream of such a *dénouement* to the broad farce he had seen played at the concert. It was not that he had credited Otho with being any better than he was, but it had not occurred to him to look at such a side as being possible to the affair. If any one had suggested it to him, he would have said first, that Otho would not dare to commit such a sin where a girl of Ada's upbringing was concerned, and next, that Ada herself was beyond suspicion. The whole thing had burst upon him, and he was filled with disgust and horror, such as a man whose mind and life have been alike clean, must feel when he comes face to face with such a history, and finds it intruding itself into the most intimate relations of his own life.

Summoning up his courage, he had told her all that had happened. She had at first been standing. As he proceeded, her face went paler ; her limbs trembled. At the picture of how he had found Ada lying by the roadside, the tears rained from her eyes. And when he ceased to speak she was seated at the table, her head buried in her arms, as if she would fain have hidden her face from him and from all the world. Indeed, a cloud of great darkness hung over her soul, and it seemed for the moment as if neither religion nor hope, nor any good thing could stand in the presence of overwhelming, triumphant villainy like this. Michael was watching her silently, while a conflict was going on in his own mind. She considered him the embodiment of strength and goodness, and believed implicitly in a most godlike mind which she attributed to him. And he knew she thought that of him. Women's eyes have the habit of confiding such opinions, to the men concerning whom they hold them, when their tongues may not say the same things.

Michael knew very well that he was nothing at all like what she imagined him to be ; indeed, he perhaps would not have been what she thought him if he could. He was, as he knew, something a great deal more serviceable and useful in this working day world—a man, with a man's wants and failings and weaknesses. And the desire which just then was stronger in him than anything else was, not to lecture this young woman, from the superior standpoint of a godlike intelligence, on the futility of her cries and tears, but to clasp her in his arms, and tell her that it was all very dreadful—even more dreadful than she in her innocence knew or could understand yet, and that he only asked her to let him take the half of all her trouble upon himself. That was his impulse, even as he stood here. And the conflicting agency, which beat back this desire was, the fear lest to do what he wished now might bear the semblance of entrapping her, of taking her unawares, and of making her need into his opportunity. Not very godlike this, nor very superior, but quite human.

‘All is of no use, then?’ she said at last, raising her face, tear-stained and disfigured, from her hands, and looking at him. Then, as if a sudden thought had struck her, she rose and came hastily near to where he stood.

‘How stupid of me to sit crying there, and thinking of nothing but myself, while *you* think of every one except yourself. You wish me to go to her, do you not? And I will go. I will be ready directly, if you will wait. I never thought of it. If he deserts her, I will not. If I can do nothing else, I can sit by her, and people can hear that I am there. That is always something.’

She made a step as if to go to the door. Michael caught her hand to detain her.

‘No, no ! I was thinking nothing of the kind,’ said he. ‘You must not go. Do you know—but of course you don’t—that she is perfectly insane at this present moment? She would not know you. She does not know me ; and she would shriek with horror if any one showed her her child. She is in the right hands, and you must not go near her.’

‘Mad—but she will get better?’

‘I hope so—at least, perhaps she may.’

‘But she will recover her reason?’

‘Most likely, if she lives. But it may be a long time first.’

Stayed in her desire to go to Ada’s help, and as it were cast back upon herself, Eleanor stood drooping for a moment.

‘Have you had no telegram from London?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I had nearly forgotten. This is it,’ she said, taking it from the mantelpiece. Michael read—

‘Your message received and attended to.’ It was from Gilbert. He turned it over reflectively.

‘H’m ! I wonder what that means.’

‘Can it mean that he is coming? I wish he had been more explicit.’

‘He would not wish to excite suspicion. Bradstane suspicion is easily aroused. If he did come, it would be by the south mail, which is due in a quarter of an hour. If you like, if you will allow me, I will wait with you till he comes ; or rather, till we see whether he comes.’

‘You are very good. You are sure there is nothing more that I can do?’

‘Nothing, at present.’

‘Then shall we go to the other room, and stay with Mrs. Parker till we know what happens?’

‘If you like,’ said Michael, slowly ; and he felt as if some living, tangible thing were rushing on wings of swiftness towards them, so visibly, to him, did the moment approach when the veil between them should be rent aside. Yet he made a step towards the door, as if to open it for her ; and she moved towards it too, and swerved unsteadily to one side, for excitement and suspense had told upon her and weakened her. Michael knew that she was proud, and that her pride impelled her to conceal what she felt as long as was practicable ; but not the slightest sign or movement that she made could escape him. He was at her side in an instant.

‘No, stay here ! Do not go into the other room,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘I will bring Mrs. Parker to you, if you like ; but do you stay here.’

He had a firm hand, and a grasp at once strong and gentle ; and as she felt her hand in it she paused again, steadying herself against the head of a sofa, and looking at him, half-affrighted, half-eager, at the look she encountered.

‘It was nothing—the weakness of a moment,’ she said. ‘I will conquer it. I must not give way now.’

‘I think you must,’ said he, as he released her hand, and stood before her for a moment. ‘You are faint ; you are weak ; you are broken. This battle is one for which you have never been trained. Give way ; it is the best.’

‘And what is to become of me if I do?’ she asked, blankly.

Michael opened wide his arms. She looked at him for a little while, and then, with a low sobbing, as of one who is weary and broken-hearted, moved towards him as he towards her, and found her rest.

* * * * *

They were still sitting together, when a ring sounded through the house.

‘That is just the time for the people from the south to come in,’ said Eleanor. And in another moment her maid had ushered Gilbert Langstroth into the room. Both of them noticed the expression upon Gilbert’s face as he came in. It was one of eager expectancy. Both saw the glance which fell from his eyes upon Eleanor. It chilled her; it was like the looks he had bestowed upon her when he had sent her the flowers, before he had preached to her a sermon on the necessity of evil to the development of good in the world. But from her, his eyes fell upon Michael, and his face changed. He was quite silent. She rose, looking at him tremulously.

‘You are very, very good. I did not quite know what to expect from your message,’ said she.

‘I knew you would not. I could not explain in a telegram. From yours, I gathered that some kind of storm had burst, and that you were in trouble.’

‘I am in such trouble, that but for him,’ she said, slowly, and stopped a moment, laying her hand upon Michael’s arm, and looking very earnestly at Gilbert, who had gone very pale. Michael had not changed. But as Eleanor paused, Gilbert’s eager look all faded, and he shook slightly from head to foot. The two brothers were regarding one another; for the first time for six years they were actually confronted. They must, to carry this business through, have some kind of intercourse and communication.

‘But for him,’ she went on, ‘I could have done nothing. I—a woman, could have done nothing to any purpose.’

She looked from one to the other of them earnestly, imploringly, and still there was silence ; till at last she sat down at the table, rested her arms upon it, and leaning forward said, first to one and then to the other—

‘Michael, you have spent your strength and your time this day in helping those who have never done you any good, in trying to save them from the effects of their sins, at least. And you, Gilbert, have come promptly here on no selfish errand. At my call you have come quickly to help me, who have no claim at all upon you. So good, and so considerate and helpful to others, will you go on hating each other ; will you not be brothers again ?’

The two men were looking into each other’s eyes, and Michael at last knew what that strange, potent sensation had been, which had shaken him on encountering Gilbert’s look that night, when they had been almost side by side at the concert-room. Not hate, not resentment, as he had fancied ; neither one nor the other ; but his old love for his brother, the ancient, inborn love, which not all the anger, enmity, and bitterness had succeeded in quenching. And the voice which addressed them both, went on speaking still, earnestly, tremulously, with passionate conviction—

‘If but one good thing came out of all this blackness, would it not be better than nothing—nothing but sin and sorrow ? And there is so much grief and so much wrong in the world, that if men had not forgiveness to fight them with, I do not see how there could be any chance for happiness at all.’

There was another little pause. At last Gilbert said, in a low voice—

‘I never hated him——’

Without quite knowing how, they found their hands clasped, each in one of the other's, and Michael said, 'Shall it be all over, Gilbert?'

'From the bottom of my heart.'

'Then let us say no more about it.'

Eleanor rose.

'I shall leave you,' she said, gently. 'Stay here if you choose. I shall go to Mrs. Parker.'

Gilbert and Michael both made a movement towards the door, but something in Gilbert's look caused Michael to fall back and yield place to his brother. He turned away, went inside the room again, and looked into the fire, feeling that he could afford to be very magnanimous.

Gilbert opened the door, and as Eleanor was passing out, he said to her almost in a whisper—

'Only one word. You and he—are you—has he—have you given him any promise?'

Eleanor looked at him steadily, though without any of the old distrust, and then answered him in the same voice, but with a proud smile—

'I have promised him everything. I have given my life into his hands.'

'I am too late?'

She hesitated, looking troubled. Gilbert smiled slightly.

'I should always have been too late, Eleanor?'

She looked at him appealingly, and inclined her head. He bowed to her, and she went quickly away. Gilbert returned to the room, and to his brother.

'I shall never want to say anything to her again, Michael, that you may not hear.'

Michael looked at him, but said nothing, and Gilbert went on—

‘Shall we have to see her again to-night—on this matter, I mean?’

‘No. Let us go to my house, if you will come. There is a black business to be settled, sooner or later.’

CHAPTER XL

‘AMIDST THE BLAZE OF NOON’

MICHAEL took his brother home, and so true is it that time and life can and do, if not wipe out, yet blur and deface the recollection of the sternest and most terrible past scenes, that Michael never once thought, as he opened the door, and ushered Gilbert in, of how that door had last closed upon his companion. Gilbert, however, remembered it—remembered many other things too, as he entered the familiar square hall, and looked furtively round at the well-known things which still furnished it. When they got into the library, some recollection of it all seemed to come to Michael too. Perhaps something in his brother's attitude, and in the slow, stiff way in which he moved and gazed about him, recalled past scenes to his mind. He turned to Gilbert, took his hand into one of his, and laid the other upon his shoulder.

‘Gilbert, we have little time for going into old troubles, in the midst of these new ones; but, I say, let bygones be bygones. I am more glad than I can tell you to see you here; and I would like you to feel it your home again, if you can.’

Gilbert's only present reply—though he had more to say, at some future date—was to wring the hand that

held his. They understood each other again, at last—or, perhaps, for the first time; and as Michael said, there was no time for further explanations. He rang the bell, and ordered refreshments for his brother; and while Gilbert ate and drank, Michael sat conning over a railway guide, and jotting down memoranda.

‘How long can you stay, Gilbert? Over to-morrow?’

‘I could manage till the day after, if I wire to my head man to-morrow morning.’

‘That is well. Then to-morrow, I will leave you in charge here, and go over to Leeds, and tell Roger of this. If I began to write it, I should make a mess of it, I know; besides, writing is cold-blooded work, in such a case.’

‘It was all off between them, was it not?’

‘Ay. But it never need have been, but for that d—d scoundrel philandering round the girl, and putting her out of conceit with Roger. It is his doing from beginning to end, and I must say I should glory in seeing him punished as he deserves. I think he wants tearing to pieces. But don’t talk to me about it, or I shall lose all my self-control, and I want it every bit.’

With which he returned to the study of Bradshaw, trying to make out how he could soonest get himself conveyed to Leeds, see Roger, and return to Bradstane. And as he searched in the railway guide, to see how the trains were connected on the different lines, there came into his mind a keen sense of the grimness of the contrast between his errand, and the means by which he was going to hurry to Roger with his budget of ill-news, and back again.

Our modern contrivances, indeed, for speedily moving

about from place to place, and for darting news hither and thither, have a certain appearance of haste and want of dignity when tragedy comes in question. And yet, it is surely a proof of the intrinsic might, of the victorious power of great elementary human emotions, that when they are every now and then called into play, in this decorous age, it is they that triumph, and not the comfortable arrangements which only take into account ease of mind and plenty of purse. Love and hate and despair go striding grimly or gloriously on, and live their lives, and strike their strokes, and sway the minds and souls of those possessed by them, and override the obstacles in their course, as potently now as they did in more picturesque days. Bradshaw and the penny post come in in a parenthesis, and the system of electric telegraphy powerfully supports them, so that we can send the news of our own catastrophes, or of those of our neighbours, with a speed unheard of a century ago, though even before then there was a saying that ‘ill news travels fast.’ Nay, these things, if rightly considered, appear conducive to privacy rather than, as might appear from a superficial glance, to publicity. For any one who reads a startling announcement in letter or newspaper, has the habit, nowadays, of calling it a *canard*, and of saying that it is sure to be contradicted to-morrow. And so it often is. But even if it be not, this beautiful system of Bradshaw, penny post and Co., has no sooner certified the truth of one calamity, than it is ready and to the fore with another, and a worse than the former one; which second tragedy an intelligently interested public devours, even if incredulous, with never-satiated delight; and thus the immediate actors in the events chronicled are in reality left almost as much

to themselves and their own devouring emotions, as they would have been before the steam-engine was invented. The world has heard of your domestic drama, that is true; and its details have been printed in every daily paper throughout the kingdom. But the day after, it is provided with something much more remarkable than your twopenny-halfpenny calamity, and has forgotten in a week that it ever heard your name.

Some such train of thought was in Michael's mind, as he paused to consider the sequence in which he should arrange his different tasks on the morrow. Gilbert's voice broke in upon his reverie. He had risen, and stood with his back against the mantelpiece.

'Michael, it seems that you and Miss Askam "understand each other," as the phrase goes.'

'Yes, we do,' said Michael.

'I'll make a clean breast of it. Last year, I came down here with some curiosity to see this girl who had come and planted herself down with Otho. Knowing what he was, I was undecided whether she was very fast, or very silly. So I came prepared for a good deal of amusement. You need not glare at me in that way. I would bet something you had your own private bit of astonishment in the matter, too. Well, the very first time I saw her, I understood one thing—that she was neither fast nor silly, and the more I saw of her the more lost in astonishment I was. Do you remember that knight in "The Faery Queene"—I forget which he was—who came across a woman of her sort, and was struck dumb by her goodness, till

“He himself, long gazing thereupon,
At last fell humbly down upon his knee,
And of his wonder made religion.”

It was something like that with me ; and in a very short time I had made up my mind that she was the woman I would marry, if I could only get her to take me. And I had the best hopes in the world, for Otho had begun to conduct himself like a maniac, even then, and she speedily found out that I was the only person who had any control over him. Well, then came that night of the concert ; a good many things came about that night, it seems to me. And when I saw you and her in the same room together, and you speaking to her, and her to you, I was certain there was something of the kind going on. Michael, I gave her up from that moment. . . . And yet, when time went on—it is nearly a year ago—and I heard of nothing between you, I began to think that, perhaps, after all, you had decided to have nothing to do with one who belonged to *us*, and I began to have a little hope again. When I got her telegram this morning, I felt a good deal of hope, and I frankly confess I was not sorry to hear that she was in trouble. I hoped that I could so serve her that I should be able to ask for a reward ; and the shape I proposed to give it was, that we should pension off Otho with her money, —some of it, you know,—and that she should come to me, and never be troubled any more—if she only would. But you had forestalled me ; and since it is you, I submit ; but if it had been anybody else——'

He paused expressively. Michael was looking earnestly at him, a crowd of new emotions in his heart. This, then, was the secret of Gilbert's conduct which had so puzzled Eleanor.

'I should have told her long ago that I loved her,' observed Michael ; 'but there was her money, and her connections. They were too much for me.'

‘As far as money goes, you will be her equal,’ said Gilbert. ‘I don’t suppose she will let Otho starve, and I can assure you there will not be a great superfluity of means when his affairs are wound up; and now that this girl and this child will have to be provided for——’

‘If they live,’ put in Michael.

‘If they live—yes. Well, that will make a hole in her income, I can assure you. While, on your part, there is that money—Michael——’ he hesitated, stammered—‘that money that——’

‘I know,’ said Michael, quietly. ‘What about it?’

‘Why, I have done well with it. I have always hoped that some day you would not reject it. It is six years ago, and I have made the most of it. It is a good large sum now—larger than if——’

Michael gave a short laugh.

‘I can well believe that.’

‘And if I am to believe that you have forgiven,’ he added earnestly, ‘you will not refuse any longer to take your share—ay, and as much more as you like—so that you can go to her and fear nothing, even if she loses every penny she has.’

There was a pause. Michael at last said—

‘You must let me think about it. I cannot decide such a thing all in a minute.’

Indeed, he felt that he could not. And he was beginning to feel that six years ago he had been hard—as hard as some pagan or puritan, whose creed relentlessly demands an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Quite a new feeling came over him with regard to Gilbert, who, it seemed, had worked for him for many years, and patiently bided till circumstances should allow him to offer the fruits of his work. Sweeping condemna-

tions, he reflected, would be comfortable, very comfortable, to the carnal heart of offended man; but reasonable man must confess that scarcely ever are they just.

* * * * *

The months dragged on. Autumn fled by; winter had passed from off the face of the earth, and disappeared from the skies, but not from the soul and the mind of Ada. Gradually, after a long and terrible illness, her bodily health began to be restored. The death for which she had prayed, and which she had wildly begged Michael to procure for her, had stayed his hand. She was uplifted from the bed of sickness, but arose a changed being, altered and transformed apparently in her very nature. A melancholy, deep, black, and profound as the grave itself, had settled upon her—a melancholy which nothing ever seemed to move or change. She was not mad now, if she could still hardly be called sane, just because of this black cloud which rolled between her and other persons. She had no craze, and no delusion, properly speaking; she was simply dead to hope and joy, to every amelioration of the present, to every hope in the future. Eleanor studied her with awe and wonder, realising the mysterious nature of the human creature in her. For if Ada had lost great things, if she had fallen from a high ideal, had been dashed from a great height of purity and loftiness of soul, and so had felt herself irreparably stained and polluted, her present condition of apathetic despair would have been comprehensible to Eleanor, and she would have sympathised as well as pitied. But the things she had lost, and the loss of which had reduced her to what she was, were so small; at least, they appeared so to the other. It was

not for moral and spiritual degradation that she mourned and refused to be comforted, but for material trouble,—vanity crushed, great hopes of advancement and aggrandisement shattered ; her social position, such as it was, gone for ever, and humbler women who had been clever enough to take care of themselves, exalted above her. When they showed her her child, who was a healthy and beautiful boy, though not robust, she turned away in horror, with hatred in her eyes—the nearest approach to an active emotion which she had shown since her calamity. It was what Michael had expected to see, and he noted it down in his mind.

‘I wish he was dead, and me too!’ she said, looking coldly at Michael. ‘I think you might have put us both out of the way, Dr. Langstroth, if you had had as much kind feeling as people talk about.’

Michael told Eleanor that the child must be removed from Ada’s vicinity. Therefore, while the latter remained at the farm, in Mrs. Nadin’s care, Eleanor charged herself with the baby, and took it and its nurse into her house. She could have devised no surer means of healing the wounds, sweetening the bitterness, soothing the angriness of her own thoughts. The utter helplessness of the child, the terrible circumstances of its birth, its clouded future, appealed irresistibly to her nature. She grew to love the little creature with an intensity which surprised herself. She hushed it to sleep in her arms, or interrogated its large mournful eyes as they stared upwards, with long, vacant gaze into her absorbed face. And in this occupation she had time to ponder over all that had happened, and to try to shape her course in accordance, not with the dictates of anger and passion, however just, but with the laws of mercy and forgiveness. The help-

less figure in her arms, whose warm and clinging dependence seemed to make everything more human and more endurable, softened her, calmed her, so that sometimes she spoke to Michael of what had happened, and of what might happen, with an insight and a depth of thought and feeling which surprised him, ready as he was to credit her with all manner of goodness and nobleness.

Her great desire, during the period in which the boy was under her care, was to get a marriage performed between Otho and Ada. Thorsgarth was not an entailed property, though it had always been the practice in the Askam family to arrange it and the succession to it as if it had been. If Otho and Ada were married, and he could be forced to do justice to this child, though he could never give him the name he ought to have borne, yet much evil would be removed, and great sorrow and heart-burning averted.

Strange to say, the difficulties in the way of this scheme arose, not with Otho, but with Ada. When the latter was well enough to leave the farm, Eleanor brought her to her own house, since Ada utterly refused to go home, saying she would kill herself if they took her there.

Through Gilbert, she and Michael had word that Otho was subdued, cowed, and changed ; that it had become a sort of superstitious wish with him to have the marriage legalised. This gave hope to Eleanor. But Ada, when questioned, merely said, with profound melancholy, and profound indifference, 'What does it matter? If he married me fifty times, he cannot give me back any of the things that made me happy. I do not care what any one thinks or says. Father says he will remove from

here, and let me live with him. That will do as well as anything.'

So firmly was she planted in this mind, that after a time they ceased to press it upon her, trusting to time to work a change. At the end of March she was still at the Dower House, seeing only Eleanor, Michael, and her father, who sometimes came to visit her. Mr. Dixon was a broken man now. His wife's anger took a different shape from his; she would have had him sell his business and retire altogether from a place where they could never hold up their heads again. But the poor old man was not thus to be torn away from his child, or from the place where she was. Mrs. Dixon indignantly refused to see the baby; but her husband frequently stole up to the Dower House of an afternoon or evening, creeping timidly into the room where his daughter sat, and taking a place beside her. And here he used to nurse his little grandchild upon his knee, trying to disguise from Ada the delight he could not help taking in its looks and ways, as, when he had once or twice called her attention to them, she had looked at him and at the child, too, in a strange way, of which Eleanor took more notice than he did; and, warned by Michael, she was ever on her guard. But it was not written that Ada was to fulfil her lot in any way such as they sometimes dimly dreaded. Her thoughts strayed within her darkened mind, and as she saw the spring outside breaking around her, and beheld also the looks and gestures by which Michael and Eleanor sometimes betrayed, amidst all the gloom, that they loved, and were happy, Ada might have cried also—

'Oh, dark, dark, dark, amidst the blaze of noon!'

Most likely, the intelligence of a certain order which

her woe seemed to have developed in her, read their fears, and smiled at them. They thought she planned nothing for the future, any more than she revived at any sign in the present; but in this they were mistaken.

CHAPTER XLI

‘LET ME ALONE’

As soon as she had been able to brace herself up to it, about three weeks after Ada's return, Eleanor had driven to Balder Hall to see Magdalen, who was, of course, acquainted with what had happened. While Miss Askam could not restrain her sobs and tears when she came to speak of these things, Miss Wynter maintained her usual impassive calm. What she felt about it, none could have told. She asked many questions which Eleanor, keenly feeling her right to be informed in the matter, answered freely; but she was very quiet and calm, and made scarce any comments upon it all, and let Eleanor go away, scarcely replying to the offers of friendship and sympathy on the part of the latter. Eleanor had mentioned Miss Strangforth, to which Magdalen replied very quietly—

‘Miss Strangforth is dying. I fear there is no doubt about that, though Michael would scarcely be likely to mention it to you in your other troubles. It is a question of time only, he tells me—and not a very long time.’

‘And then—you?’

‘I—oh, I shall get on somehow. I am not afraid.’

‘But promise me that if you are not decided, you will come to me till you know something.’

'I will see. I appreciate your kindness, but I can promise nothing,' said Magdalen; but to the great surprise of Eleanor, she stooped her proud head, and lightly kissed her visitor's cheek.

With this unaccustomed salute still tingling there—now hot, now cold—Eleanor drove home, with what cheer she might.

A short time after this, just about Christmas, Miss Strangforth died. Her place was empty at last, and there was to be one made for the heir to step into. Eleanor wondered what would happen to Magdalen, and at last received news through Michael. She was going to remain at Balder Hall. Mr. Strangforth, the new owner, was a middle-aged man, with an invalid wife. He was, of course, distantly related to Magdalen herself. He had a family of boys and girls, who wanted much looking after, and he had asked Miss Wynter to remain, and manage the household as she had always done. It seemed a strange post for the haughty young woman, who had been almost too proud to set foot outside her aunt's park. She had accepted Mr. Strangforth's offer, and said she would call to see Eleanor as soon as she had time. At present she was so busy preparing for the new-comers that she could not leave the house.

'Oh,' exclaimed Eleanor, 'is he a nice man, Michael? Will he be kind to her?'

'He is a very sedate, grave kind of man—almost austere. But he is a gentleman, and he will behave becomingly towards her, I am certain. He quite appreciates her devotion to his aunt, and told me he should always provide for her in a way suitable to her condition and his family, whatever that may mean.'

Eleanor was very thoughtful about this. She seemed

to see Magdalen—and yet she could not believe that it would ever be so—growing into one of those women whose lives are all behind them ; gradually becoming old and more stately, more monumental, as the years went by ; so that at last no one would imagine, to look at her, that she had been the centre of such passions as she had caused, or moved in ; so that no one but herself and a few others, grown old with her, would know how hotly her heart had beaten, at the same time that other old hearts had throbbed, which with time had grown chill.

And at this time, at the end of March, a change took place in the circumstances of all, and the marriage which Eleanor had grown so anxious for, took place—but not until a little later, in April.

Gilbert wrote to Michael, and said that he and Otho were coming to Thorsgarth ; that Otho's affairs were now in such a state that something must be done about them. He had, it would seem, run his course, and it was necessary to see what could be retrieved in his estate. They were, of course, coming very quietly, and would stay as short a time as possible, bringing the solicitor of the Askam family with them, as there were certain papers at Thorsgarth which it was necessary to overhaul. He wished Eleanor to know this, as Otho was still in his cowed and subdued state, and ready to go through the marriage with Ada, if she could be persuaded to it.

Eleanor waited till she had heard that they had actually arrived at Thorsgarth, and then shut herself up with Ada, and combated her objections in such wise, and placed the matter in such a light, that Ada at last exclaimed—

'Very well! Give me peace! Since you say it will do so much good, let us try it.'

The words haunted her hearer for some time, but she felt that her purpose was genuine. Some of the reproach would be wiped away, and the future of the child would at any rate be rendered somewhat more hopeful. She at once communicated with Gilbert and Mr. Johnson, and a special license having been procured, Otho Askam and Ada Dixon were made man and wife, in the drawing-room of the Dower House, one showery April morning. Eleanor noticed how, during the service there was a violent shower of rain, which beat against the pane, while the sunlight fell on the trees in the square outside, and how, at the sound of the falling water, Ada lifted her face to the window, and looked with a strange look towards the sky.

Eleanor found her eyes dragged towards Otho, by a power stronger than her own will. She was struck with the change in him. He had grown old-looking: his shoulders were bowed; his head drooped. He glanced from one to the other of them, with a shifty, cowed expression; and his eyes every now and then wandered towards Ada, who was perhaps the only person in the room who neither saw nor looked at him. When it was over, and Gilbert, who had been at his side through it all, took his arm to lead him away, he wiped the sweat from his brow, and looked all about him, and at Gilbert, and at Ada, with a white, scared face, and moved uncertainly, as if he could not see.

When every one had gone, except Mr. Dixon, Eleanor went to Ada, stooped over her chair, and said—

'Now, Ada, the worst is over. You may have something to live for yet.'

Ada looked at her with one of those prolonged, vacant gazes, which seemed to Eleanor to come from somewhere far on the other side of the tomb, and shaking her head, merely replied—

‘Let me alone now. I’ve done what you wanted. I am satisfied. Next time, I will do what *I* want.’

CHAPTER XLII

HOW ADA SOLVED HER PROBLEM

It was a week after the marriage, and during that week much business had been accomplished, and many plans laid. Ever since that day, a change had been perceptible in Ada—a change which, by contrast with her late gloom, might almost have been called brightness. She noticed persons and things, and once or twice voluntarily addressed herself to others.

Gilbert had been in communication with Eleanor, on business affairs, and it was decided that Thorsgarth need not be sold, if Eleanor chose to make an allowance to her brother and to Ada, which she was very willing to do, so long as Otho agreed to absent himself from her neighbourhood and that of Ada, wherever they might be. He was ready enough to promise this. His fear and dread seemed to have turned into an indifference in which considerable irritability displayed itself. But for the strong head and hand of Gilbert keeping him in check, it seemed as if Otho, once secure of a subsistence, would have taken his departure from the scene, and left those behind him to settle his affairs as they could, or would. This, however, he was not permitted to do, but was kept on the spot until everything was arranged, the agreements drawn up and signed,—a ceremony which took

place at the Dower House, in the presence of Otho, Eleanor, Gilbert, Mr. Coningsby of Bradstane, Mr. Palfreyman of London, and the requisite witnesses.

By the new arrangement Eleanor would be practically left with only two or three hundred a year at her disposal, instead of the ample income of twelve or thirteen hundred a year which she had hitherto enjoyed. In another state of things this might have troubled her, but now it failed to do so in the least. Discussing the circumstance one day with Michael, she smilingly said something about his being tied to a pauper, to which Michael replied in a very matter-of-course tone, that as soon as everything was settled, and Otho gone away, and Ada retired to her father's house, he intended Eleanor and himself to be married.

'The sooner you enter upon your life of pauperism, the better,' he remarked.

Eleanor made no opposition ; her feeling was one of thankfulness that instead of coming in the style of the orthodox lover, and asking her what she would like to do, he simply told her what was going to be done. Her trust in him was entire and without flaw or reservation, and from this course on his part she perceived that his trust in her was of the same nature as hers in him. She might have echoed the words of the heroine in 'Wuthering Heights,' who cried, 'Do I love Heathcliff? Why, I *am* Heathcliff!' So Eleanor felt with regard to Michael. That which they had passed through together, the fate which after so short an acquaintance, had thrown them, across every obstacle, into the closest intimacy, had developed perfection of sympathy, and a oneness of heart and mind, which sometimes only comes with years of married life, sometimes never comes at all.

On the evening of that day when the final settlements had taken place, Gilbert came to the Dower House, and related how all was decided, and how, the day after tomorrow, they were returning to town, Otho having consented to remain a day longer, as Gilbert had business to settle at the mills. These arrangements, and Ada's prospective departure, were discussed openly and purposely in Ada's presence on this particular evening, and though she did not speak, she seemed to listen attentively to what was said. By and by Gilbert went away, saying that he would see Eleanor once again before he left Bradstane altogether, as he had something that he particularly wished to say to her.

During the forenoon of the following day Michael called at the Dower House. Ada presently left him and Eleanor alone, but in a few minutes returned, dressed, to the surprise of both, in bonnet and shawl, as if she intended going out. Both looked up in astonishment. Ada's face wore an expression of something like hopefulness. It was still so different from her former face, that scarcely any one would have recognised it who had been unacquainted with the history of what had happened during the last year. That is to say, it was now no longer the face of a girl, but the set, formed countenance of a woman who has suffered, and whose sufferings have hardened, not softened her. But to-day it wore a look of expectancy, almost of animation.

'Dr. Langstroth,' said she, 'I'm going to ask a great favour of you.'

'Are you, Ada? I am glad to hear it.'

'It is, that if you've a little time to spare, you'd walk with me through the town. You see, you have that character that whatever you choose to do, you may do ;

you won't lose any reputation by being seen with me. I—I've been thinking that when you and Miss Askam are married, and I go back to father and mother, I cannot bear the long days in the house there, as I have done here. It would drive me mad. But if I'm left to myself, I shall never have the courage to walk out alone. I thought, if you'd go out with me this once, just down the town, then perhaps I might not be afraid to find my way back alone, over the old bridge and up here again, if you do not mind.'

This was by far the longest speech Ada had made since she had been under Eleanor's roof, and Michael watched her attentively as she spoke, and noticed that she did not meet his eye.

'Mind!' he echoed, rising; 'no, I do not mind, Ada. I am very glad to find you disposed to make this beginning. Let us go. Miss Askam will spare me.'

'Surely, Michael!' said Eleanor; but she looked at him anxiously, for her keen sympathy told her that he was not altogether easy about this decision of Ada's. She looked at him earnestly, and her fears were not lulled when she found that he avoided looking at her, though he waved his hand a little, and smiled, saying they should not be long.

'Oh, Michael, take care of *yourself*,' she whispered in his ear; to which he nodded, and followed Ada out of the room. Eleanor watched them from the window, and saw that they walked slowly.

Two minutes after they had gone, Gilbert came in.

'You are alone,' he said; 'I am not sorry, Eleanor, for I want to say something to you.'

'Yes, Gilbert,' said she, and he was surprised when she took the hand he extended into both her own, and

pressing it almost convulsively, said, rapidly, and with a kind of passion in her tones—‘Another time I will see you alone—whenever you like; and if you have any favour to ask of me, I swear I will grant it; but oh, Gilbert, listen to me, now. Ada has asked Michael to take her for a walk through the town, because she dare not go alone. I know he thinks she is going to try to do something dreadful, because she is not sane, though she seems so; he told me so. Perhaps to kill herself, or him. Who can answer for the fancies of a madwoman? I hate her sometimes.’

‘Well?’ he echoed, looking down into her upturned face, which seemed to blaze with emotion, and feeling a spasm contract his own heart.

‘Will you not follow them, Gilbert, dear Gilbert? For my sake, if it is not too selfish of me to ask it. If you will not go, I must. I cannot tell why I feel this agony of fear, but I do, and it masters me. To please me, Gilbert; and I will do what I can to please you, afterwards.’

She had pressed more closely to him, her eyes strainingly fixed upon his face, her whole frame trembling. Her agitation communicated itself to Gilbert, like some subtle electric thrill. Over his blue-gray eyes there was a kind of film, and a tremor in his voice, as he said—

‘For your sake, my sister . . . but . . . if anything hinders me from seeing you again to-day, Eleanor, good-bye.’

He stooped his head, and his lips rested for a second, no more, upon her brow. And then she was alone again.

* * * * *

Michael and Ada walked slowly down the sloping square, where they saw scarcely any one. Then, turning

a corner, they emerged in the main street of the old town, which also sloped steeply downhill. The sunlight was streaming gaily upon this street; the shops were open, and many people were moving to and fro. In it were situated the house of Ada's father, her former home; the schoolroom in which the concert had taken place, and several other public buildings—all clustering together, in homely vicinity, as they do in towns of this size. As they proceeded down this street they, of course, attracted notice. It was not a usual thing to see Michael walking in a leisurely manner down the town at that hour of the day. And it was more than a year since his companion had been seen in the places where her figure had once been familiar. People looked at them—came to their doors in curiosity, and gazed at and after them, and Michael knew that his companion was trembling from head to foot. Her face was deadly pale; her eyes were fixed upon the ground. But she neither hurried, nor faltered in her step, walking straight onwards, down the hill, and towards the mills. When they were nearly there, and the number of people who were about had sensibly diminished, he spoke to her, for the first time, quietly and tranquilly—

‘Now, Ada, shall we return? I think you have walked far enough.’

‘Not that way,’ she replied, in a fluttering voice. ‘I can’t face it again. We’ll cross the footbridge, and go round the other side, where it’s quieter.’

He humoured her, and they went through the dark passage, and emerged on the bridge.

‘Now,’ said she, ‘won’t you turn back, sir? I don’t want to keep you, and I can go well enough by myself this way. It is very quiet.’

‘Yes, very quiet,’ replied he composedly. ‘I will walk round with you. My time is quite at your disposal.’

She hesitated for a moment, and he saw that she looked at him in a stealthy, side-long manner, of which he took no notice, openly. Happening to turn his head, he saw Gilbert just behind them. He wondered how he had got there, but felt a sense of relief in knowing that he was present, and obeying a sign of his brother’s hand, took no notice of him.

Midway over the bridge, Ada walked more slowly, raised her head, and began to look about her.

‘Why,’ she observed, ‘the river is in spate; that’s the rains up by Cauldron, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ said Michael; and, indeed, there was a wild, if a joyous prospect around them. April green on the woods and grass, and April sunshine in the sky, and the river, which was, as she said, in spate, tearing along, many feet higher than usual, with brown, turbid waters, looking resistless in their swiftness and their strength.

‘Well,’ she next observed, in a muffled voice, ‘it’s far worse than I thought, and not better, as Miss Askam said it would be. It makes me sure that I’m right.’

‘Right in what, Ada?’

‘In what I thought about facing the people again.’

‘It is the first step that costs. In time you will mind it less. It is well that you tried it.’

‘Perhaps it is. It is well to make sure of things,’ said Ada, in a stronger voice. ‘But I’ll never do it again. I’ll never be stared at and whispered about in that way, any more. They would like to throw stones at me, if they dared. If I’d been alone, I daresay they would have done.’

‘You wrong them——’

‘What does it matter?’ she said, coldly. as she stooped to pick a tuft of small flowers from the grassy bank of the river. Then she paused a moment, picking them to pieces, and seemed absorbed in reflection upon what she had felt in passing through the town. Suddenly she looked up at Michael, and said—

‘There’s one thing I should like to say, Dr. Langstroth. *You* are a man, whatever the rest may be ; and I always knew you were ; and it was because I always felt you were so high above me that I used to say such ill-natured things of you to Roger. I knew that you saw through me, if he didn’t ; but you never betrayed me. However, it will be all the same to you. I can’t hurt you or help you, one way or another—so good-bye.’

With that she slipped past him, with a darting movement which eluded his grasp, ran down the bank of the river, stood for one moment poised for the spring she took, and the next instant he saw her swept like a reed, many yards away, down the giant current of the stream.

‘Fool that I was !’ he muttered, turning instinctively to rush down the stream, and if possible, go beyond her, before he plunged in, so that he could meet and intercept her. But Gilbert met him at the corner of the bridge. There was a curious look in his eyes, and his hand held back Michael by the arm, with a grip in which the latter felt powerless.

‘Your way is over the bridge,’ he said. ‘Go and meet us. Eleanor sent *me*.’

It had scarce taken two seconds to say and do ; and Gilbert had plunged into the stream also. The current instantly washed both figures across to the other bank.

Michael rushed across the bridge, and down the other side, pale ; a surging in his ears ; his heart thumping, so that his laboured breath could scarce come. Dimly he saw that other forms met him at the bridge end, and followed him ; vaguely he heard a hum of voices behind him. He pursued his way, panting, blind with fear. Ever and anon the noise of the river seemed to swell into a roar like thunder, which quenched all other sounds. Here and there a growth of bushes and willows hid the waters from him ; but at last, as he stumbled onwards, and rounded one of the curves in that much curved stream, his straining eyes caught sight of something—human forms, surely—arrested by a rock which projected midway into the current.

‘He has got to shore, and brought her with him,’ a thought seemed to say. ‘He is too exhausted to drag himself out. I shall soon be with him now.’

But, without knowing it, he began to sob and sob and sob as he approached ; and when he drew near, instead of going swiftly to the place, he strayed around and about it, and could not, dared not go close.

It seemed long, very long before he could understand. Other persons, who had seen what had happened, or part of it, and who had seen Michael rush after the other two, had come up, and they told him again and again. A score of times he heard the words repeated : ‘Dead ; both dead. No one could swim in such a flood !’ And yet he did not grasp it. But at last, after what seemed a long time, it did come home to him, and he understood that Ada had avenged herself.

CHAPTER XLIII

MAGDALEN. IN VALEDICTION

It was July of the same year, and the time drew towards evening. The bright, westering sun was shining into the library at the Red Gables. In one of the deep window-seats, Eleanor and Michael sat side by side, and hand in hand. It seemed as if he had just returned from some journey, for there were signs about the room of a traveller's recent arrival; and she, it would appear, had not even yet done bidding him welcome, her eyes dwelling still, with undiminished light of affection upon a face beloved. They had been man and wife for three weeks, and after a short ten days of honeymoon, he had brought her home, and left her there, while he went to London, to attend to the innumerable affairs connected with his brother's business, will, and death. Ten minutes ago he had come in, and she was asking him for his news, which he seemed almost unwilling to enter upon.

‘There are letters for me, I perceive,’ he said at last. ‘That is from Roger. When did it come?’

‘This morning only.’

‘Let me have it.’

‘No. I have read it. It will keep, because it contains good news. I want to know first all you have not told me. The good news for the last.’

‘I have told you almost everything, my child. It has been a sad business ; sad from beginning to end. I have settled it all up—all poor Gilbert’s affairs. He was different from me ; no doubt of that. I learnt a lesson or two.’

‘In what way ?’

‘Why, Eleanor, it is simply the old story, that a man often seems much worse than he is. I never for a moment realised that *I* could have been in fault. I always saw his sin so large ; it blotted out everything else. We will talk it all over another time. There was no difficulty in settling his affairs ; disorder was abhorrent to his very soul. When I think of that, and of his painstaking, methodical, perfect system of doing things, and then remember my own scatterbrained practices, and remember how young he was, too, I feel as if now, by the light of all these other troubles and experiences, I can understand the temptation that beset him then, to keep things safe—the returning prosperity which he had built up with so much trouble—to keep me from squandering it, as he felt sure I should. Yes ; I can see it. By George ! What an opinion I must have had in those days of my own perfection and freedom from flaw of any kind. It is incredible.’

‘But, Michael, it was wrong of him.’

‘Yes, it was wrong of him, and as wrong of me. Roger knew that. Roger was very unhappy because of what I did. We were both about as wrong as we could be, I suppose.’

Eleanor was silent. She would not gainsay him, but she did not agree ; and it was hardly to be expected that she should at that stage of the proceedings.

‘His will, Eleanor, will surprise you. It was made since that Christmas when you and he were together

at Thorsgarth ; when Magdalen and Otho became engaged. And he has left his money rather curiously,—half to Magdalen, in case she marries Otho, to be settled upon her and her children if she should have any, as strictly as it can possibly be done ; and half to you, in case you marry—whom, do you suppose ?’

‘Not himself ?’ she asked, pale and breathless.

Michael laughed.

‘No, madam, but your present husband.’

‘Michael ! And what if——’

‘If neither of those marriages really took place, it all came to me, except an annuity to Magdalen of five hundred a year.’

‘To Magdalen !’

‘Yes. I, too, was surprised at first. And then I seemed to comprehend that too. It was for the sake of old times, when we were young together. He and Magdalen in a cool, curious sort of way, always understood one another ; and when he was over here, he several times spoke to me about her, and seemed distressed at the idea of the great change and reverse that had come over her. “She is not a high-minded woman,” he said to me once, “but she has had every hope crushed, and has lived in a kind of tomb with that old woman all the best of her life.” So that was the way he took, I suppose, of expressing his sympathy.’

‘It is wonderful,’ said Eleanor, in a low voice, feeling humbled, puzzled, and ashamed. This view of Magdalen’s life had never intruded itself into her mind. And it was as if she heard a voice echoing in the air about her, ‘Judge not !’

‘Yes, it is wonderful, and very humbling to me. And to you also, he left this ring.’

He took a case from his breast-pocket, and gave it to her. It contained a ring set with a large pearl of unusual size and beauty, surrounded by brilliants, in a fine and delicate small pattern.

‘He wished you to wear it always,’ said Michael in a low voice. ‘This was in a private letter to me, half finished, which he must have left amongst his other papers when he came down here with Otho, just before that wedding. He said it was more like his idea of you than anything he had ever seen.’

Eleanor was weeping silently as Michael placed this ring upon her hand.

‘Why did he think of me in that way?’ she whispered, between her tears. ‘It was so wrong, so unlike the truth. It makes me afraid. I shall always feel that I am a renegade when I look at it.’

‘It made him a great deal happier, at any rate,’ said Michael, gently. ‘And now, Eleanor, something else. I saw Otho while I was in town.’

‘Yes?’ she said, in a slow, reluctant whisper.

‘Well, he is indeed a broken man. His sins have come home to him, and Ada avenged herself fearfully; but how, do you suppose?’

She shook her head.

‘Not by her own death; he hardly alluded to it. That whole connection with Ada was the merest freak. It is, as it were, by chance alone—that awful chance which we call Destiny—that that caprice has had such effects for us all. It is, through Gilbert’s death, and his alone. It sounds odd to say such a thing of the regard of one man for another, but one might almost say that his affection for Gilbert has been the one love of his life——’

‘I know what you mean ; and it is so, in a way. Gilbert had more of his heart and soul than any one else—even Magdalen.’

‘Yes, even Magdalen ; for he trifled and played with her, and in fact, mastered her even in coming round to her wishes ; but Gilbert, never. It was like the love of a dog for its master. It has knocked him down completely ; he has no spirit left. He said there was nothing to live for when a fellow’s friend was gone, and he gave some dark hint as to being Gilbert’s murderer. I did not stay long with him. I don’t know what will become of him. It was absolutely necessary that I should see him on business ; so I saw him, and had done with him.’

‘Did he say nothing about Ada’s little child, and its death ?’

‘Not a word ; and I did not, either. It seemed to me a desecration to mention such things to him.’

‘Yes. Let us not speak of him. We cannot do anything for him. He would not let us ; and for years to come I do not think I could bear to look upon his face. That is all I want to know. Let us read Roger’s letter now. He has got a great post, and is going to take a long holiday with us in the autumn ; and then he is going to South America to manage a business there for the people he is now with.’

‘Ah ! His career, that I have prophesied for him, is beginning then,’ said Michael, as he read Roger’s letter with her, seated beside her, each of them holding a leaf. And as they sat thus, with that softened look upon their faces which comes with thoughts of a much-loved absent one, the door opened, and the servant announced Miss Wynter.

They both looked up in surprise as she entered. She

walked up to the table and stood looking at them with a keen, searching gaze, and her lips quivered a little as she saw the attitude of entire trust, and the look of peace and of rest upon both faces. Magdalen, like the others, was in black ; she was still clad in the deep mourning she had been wearing for Miss Strangforth ; perhaps in her soul she was not sorry that circumstances allowed her to wear a garb so well according with her own feelings. But it struck Eleanor that she was equipped for a longer journey than that from Balder Hall to the Red Gables. Her face was very pale, but there was no abatement—there never had been any abatement—in the pride of its expression. Whatever Magdalen's fate, she would always carry it, to all outward seeming, with the stateliness of a queen who wears her crown.

'You were so absorbed, you scarcely heard my name,' she said, in her clear, rather sarcastic tones, and with a slight cool smile. 'I am glad to find you in. I heard that Michael was coming home to-day, and I did not wish to go away without saying good-bye.'

'You are going away?' said Eleanor. 'Are you going for long?'

'Most likely I shall never see you again,' Magdalen pursued. 'It is not probable that our paths will ever cross. Indeed, I shall make it my object to prevent them from doing so.'

'Magdalen——'

But Michael, a little better acquainted with human nature, and especially with Magdalen's nature, than was his wife, had already guessed, and his eyes were fixed upon Miss Wynter's face, scrutinisingly, but with little surprise.

'I am going to London,' said Magdalen. 'I intend travelling there by the south mail this evening. I have

sent my things on, and called to see you on my way to the station.'

'To London——' began Eleanor.

Magdalen's eyebrows contracted. She gave a short, impatient laugh.

'How long you are in comprehending! I see Michael understood at once. Ah, Michael, if you had understood me as well seven years ago! . . . Well, Eleanor, I am going to Otho.'

'To Otho!'

'Yes, to Otho. When I promised to marry him, I swore that when the time came, I would follow him faithfully, no matter how or where. He said we should both know when it had come. It has come now. Since he saw you in town, Michael, I have heard from him. He has taken some rooms for me, and I shall go and stay there; and as soon as I have been there long enough, we shall be married.'

Eleanor was silent at first. Then she began tremulously—

'Have you thought seriously about it? After what has happened, he can have no claim upon you; and you surely do not dare to go to him.'

'Dare—I dare, most certainly, go to him, and stay with him. I am not afraid of him. I never was. If some other people had been as little afraid of him as I was, perhaps he might not have made such a hideous bungle as he has done, of his life. But if I were afraid of him, I should go to him all the more, after what I swore to him, lest he should do me some hurt if I disobeyed him.'

'But, Magdalen——'

'But, Eleanor!' said the other, in a deep, stern voice. 'Let me explain myself, and then, if you fail to under-

stand, it will not be my fault. I am going to him now, first because of my promise, which meant, that when there should be nothing to prevent me from marrying him, I would be his wife. And what is there to prevent me now?’

‘There is himself!’ cried Eleanor, passionately. ‘Michael, tell her—explain to her that she must not tie——’

‘Wait! She has not finished yet,’ said Michael.

‘No, I have not,’ Magdalen assented. ‘First, because of my promise to him. You think that because himself, as you call it, frightened and repelled you, it must, of course, be the same with every one else. Well, while I am about it, I will tell you the whole truth. He has not a friend in the world, I suppose, now that Gilbert is gone, except me. I am in the same case. While my poor old aunt still lived, there was always some one who believed in me, and thought I was an angel. There is no one now. Himself—such as he is—loves me, with such love as he has to give; clings to me, and wants me. And I—such as I am—infinately beneath you, I confess’ (with a mocking smile and bow), ‘love him, with what heart has not been crushed out of me. Yes, and such as he is,’ she added, raising herself before them, and looking at them with a kind of defiance on her scornful face—‘such as he is, I think it worth while to go to him, and try to save him from destruction. Perhaps I shall not succeed. That doesn’t matter. I want something to do, and there it is, ready to my hand. . . . And also, I shall then have kept a promise to one man, at any rate.’

Eleanor stared at her, half-fascinated, half-repelled.

‘One word to you, Michael,’ added Magdalen. ‘You look happy now, as I have never seen you look before; and I firmly believe you will be happy. You must have

forgiven me long ago for not having married you ; and now I should think you join thankfulness to forgiveness. But I wish to tell you that I know I behaved vilely to you—not in breaking off our engagement, but in ever making it ; and you treated me better than most men would treat a woman who has cheated them, and then made a mess of her affairs. I wronged you, and I deserve what I have got for it. That is more than I would own to any one else in the world. It will serve as my wedding present to you, Eleanor ; there is no testimony to goodness so strong as that which is offered by what is—not goodness. And now,’ she added, looking at the clock, ‘it is time for me to go. I should like to shake hands with you both, and wish you good-bye.’

In her attitude, as she turned towards them, there was something imposing. There was neither softness, nor benignity, nor true nobility—the nobility of soul, that is—in any of her looks or gestures ; but there was a certain still, unbending pride, and a dauntless, unquailing gaze into the iron eyes of misfortune which thrilled them both. Eleanor took her hand between both her own, and looked long, earnestly, speechlessly into her face, saying at last—

‘Magdalen, why do you delight to make yourself out a worse woman than you are ? Is it nothing that you have done, to live with Miss Strangforth as you did, and treat her so that she thought you an angel ? nothing in what you are going to do ? For it is a martyrdom to which you doom yourself, say what you please.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ said Magdalen, with a harsh laugh, looking with a curious expression into Eleanor’s eyes. ‘That’s why I am not a good woman, Eleanor. It is no

martyrdom at all. I am glad, I am *glad* I am going—going to get away from this hateful place, and be married to Otho. And if I had got married to Michael, long before he ever saw you, child, I should have been a miserable woman, and should most likely have done something outrageous, sooner or later. That's where the badness comes in. Good-bye, Michael.'

'Let me come to the train and see you off,' he said.

'No, certainly not. You mean to be kind, I know ; but I am going alone. If I fancied you were looking after me, I might look back, and not be so delighted with my future as I ought.'

'Then, Magdalen, give it up, and stay with——' began Eleanor eagerly, as she stepped forward with outstretched hands. But the other had gone swiftly out of the room, without looking back, and had closed the door after her.

Eleanor turned to her husband, who was looking at her. They confronted each other for a moment or two, till she asked—

'Is she a heroine, or is she—Michael, what is she?'

'She is Magdalen Wynter,' he answered. 'I don't know what she is ; but there is certainly some heroine in her.'

'To marry Otho !' murmured Eleanor.

'I think she is just doing what she said herself, going to work with the thing nearest her hand—anything to get away from here. And it takes the shape of heroism, because, you know, she will never let him sink ; at least, she will be always struggling to keep him straight—what they call straight,' said Michael, and his voice was not quite steady. 'Magdalen always laughed at heroism,' he added.

‘God help her!’ said Eleanor, in a low voice.

* * * * *

The factories by the river have now been long disused. Most likely Michael will some time follow the once despised advice of honest Sir Thomas Winthrop, and pull them down. As they stand now, silent and quiet, footsteps echo through the passage which leads to the bridge, and Tees goes murmuring past the spot, telling, as it seems to our imperfect ears, the same story exactly that it has been telling for so many hundred years. Whether what we call inanimate nature stands blindly by, without taking any impress from the scenes which humanity acts in the arena she prepares for them, is one of the mysteries which we cannot solve. To us, the trees appear the same each year, and the voice of the river changes only with the seasons, and with periods of drought or flood. A shriek, once uttered, is lost, and death is the end of all things.

Long letters come from Roger to the friends at the Red Gables, telling of prosperity and advancement, speaking of love unchanged to them and theirs, but never hinting at any thoughts of returning to his native land.

Ada’s child, which pined and died not long after she did, is buried in her grave; and Gilbert also sleeps in Bradstane churchyard.

As for the two who were left alone of all this company who had been young at the same time, the years brought changes in their life, and oftentimes in their habitations. But since this chronicle professes only to deal with that part of their lives which was played out in the Borderland where they dwelt, it is not necessary to follow those changes, but only to say that they still

speak of Bradstane and the Red Gables as 'home.' For humane and kindly hearts always find loves and interests; hopes and occupations spring thickly around them, on every side and in every soil; and so it was with these two. Human interests and hopes, keen and deep, bind them to the old spot. There are those there, both old and young, whom they love, and who love them, and from whose vicinity they would not, if they could, tear themselves altogether. These things, and a certain righteousness of thought and deed in their own lives, have mercifully dimmed and blurred the memories of one or two tragic years, and have restored most of its loveliness and much of its freshness to life; have done for their bitterer remembrances exactly what the abundant ivy and the gracious growth of flowers and ferns have done for the naked grimness of the castle ruins which stand on the cliff above the river.

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